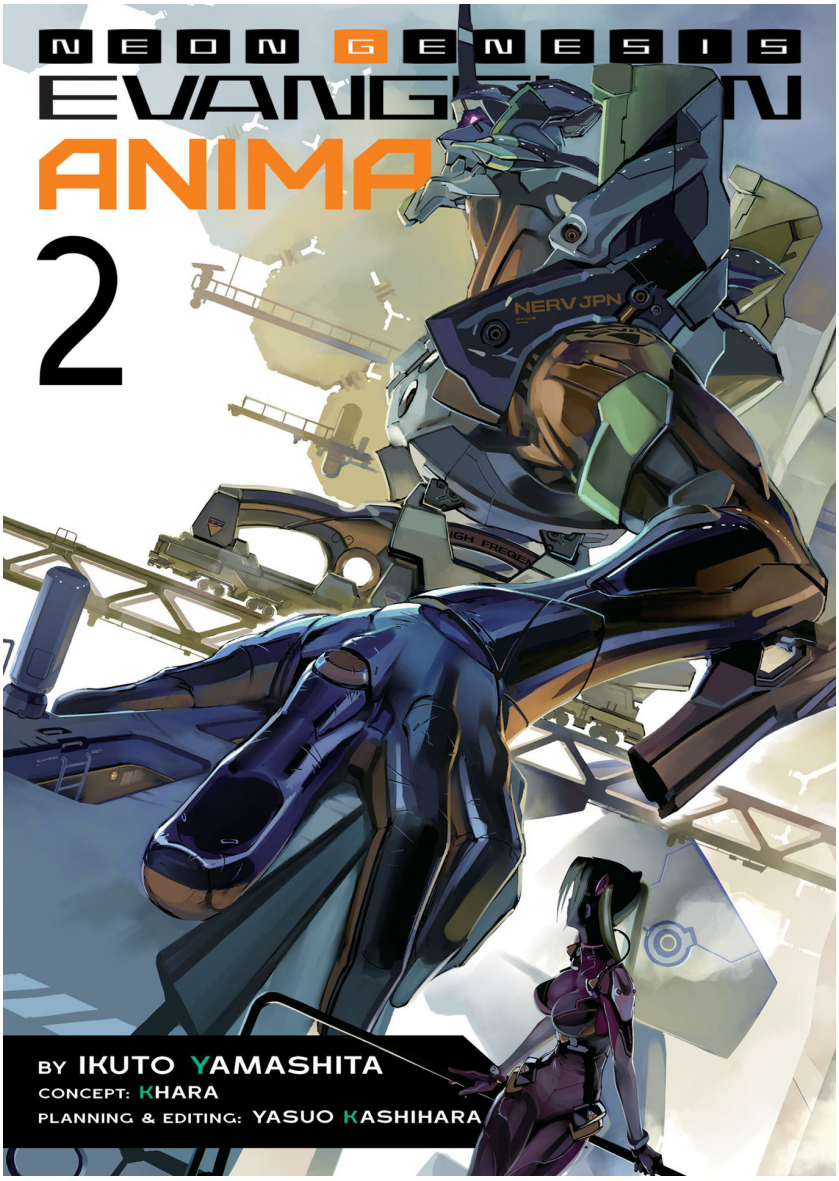

NEON GENESIS
EVANGELION
ANIMA
2
NERV JPN
BY IKUTO YAMASHITA
CONCEPT: KHARA
PLANNING & EDITING: YASUO KASHIHARA

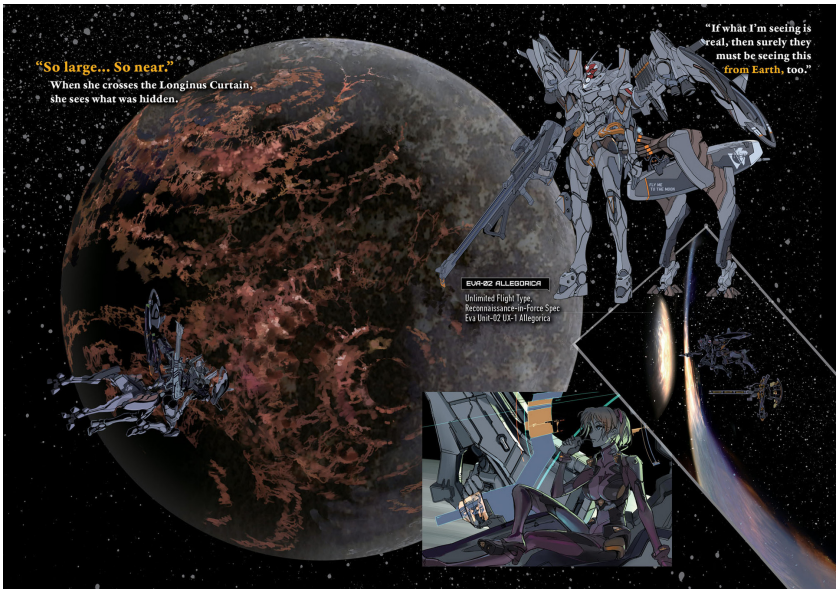
Table of Contents

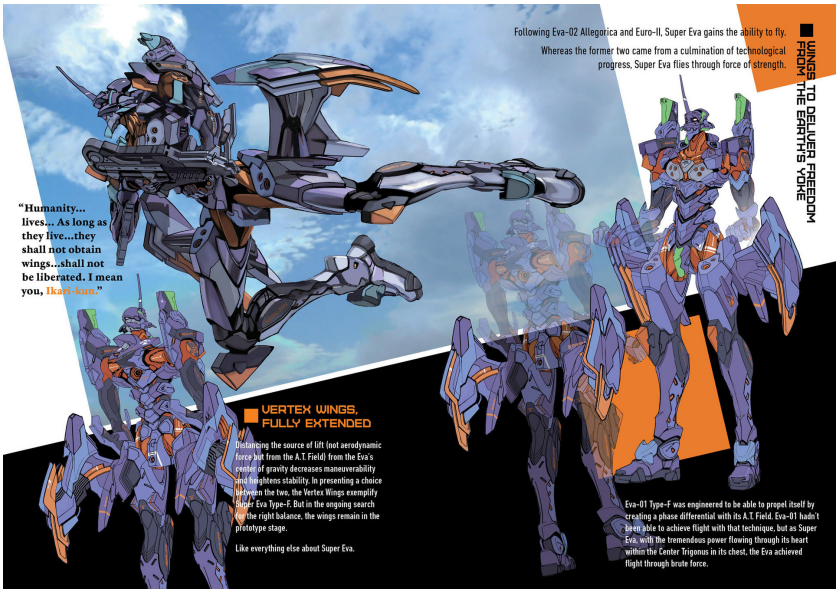
Color Inserts
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Part 1: The Tidal Wave
Chapter 1: The White Unit Two
Chapter 2: Plan Blood Red
Chapter 3: The Noose Tightens
Chapter 4: Six's Attack
Chapter 5: The Dance Continues
Part 2: The Last Seele
Chapter 6: Resistance
Chapter 7: A Black Cloud
Chapter 8: A Return to Moonlit Nights
Chapter 9: From a Great Distance
Part 3: The Twisted Garden
Chapter 10: The Flight to the Moon
Chapter 11: Heartbeat
Chapter 12: Counterattack
Chapter 13: The Lance's Logic
Part 4: Defiance
Chapter 14: Asuka's Battle
Chapter 15: Pulse
Chapter 16: Toji's Battle
Chapter 17: Ayanami Rei Cinq
Chapter 18: Two Souls
Part 5: Asuka in the Moonlight
Chapter 19: Asuka in the Moonlight
Part 6: Polar Vortex
Chapter 20: The Sealed Space
Chapter 21: Buzzing Wings
Chapter 22: Fragile and Perilous
Chapter 23: To the Sky
Chapter 24: Black Intention
Chapter 25: Three Plus Five
Chapter 26: Hostile Signal Blue
Chapter 27: Kaworu Visits

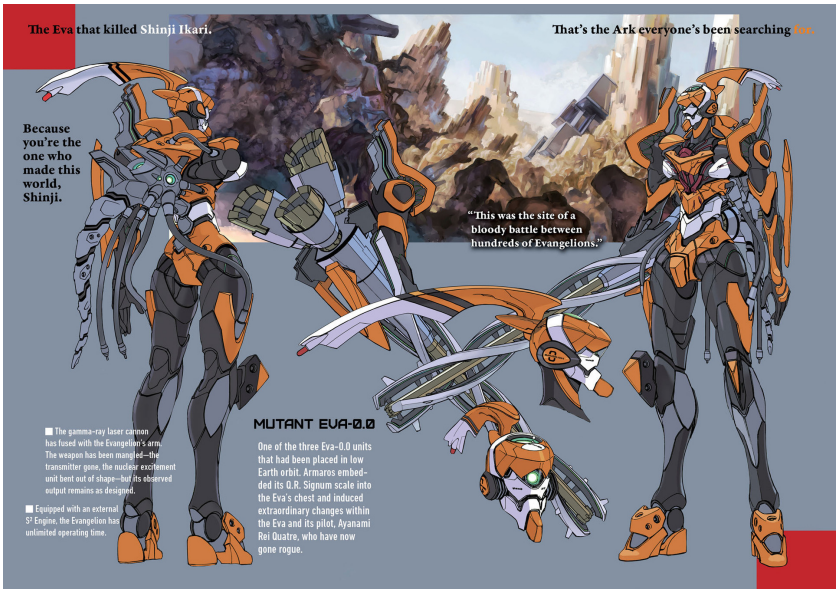
Chapter 28: Spread the Wings of War
Chapter 29: Predation
Part 7: Black Thoughts
Chapter 30: Flight School
Chapter 31: The Recluse
Chapter 32: Armaros
Chapter 33: The Return
Part 8: Somewhere in Time
Chapter 34: Window to the Moon
Chapter 35: The Person Inside
Chapter 36: Misato's Voyage
Chapter 37: Lunar Mirage
Chapter 38: Departure
Part 9: The Ark
Chapter 39: The Space Between
Chapter 40: Outside the Window
Chapter 41: The Egg of Time
Chapter 42: Kaji, Misato, Quatre, and…
Part 10: Within the Curtain
Chapter 43: The Eva Graveyard
Chapter 44: Transdimensional Corridor
Chapter 45: Asuka and the Ark
Chapter 46: Ex-Designated Weapon
Chapter 47: Attack on Armaros
Chapter 48: The Other Side of the Window
Part 11: Black and Purple
Chapter 49: The Burning Giant
Chapter 50: Ayanami Quatre
Chapter 51: The Clashing Giants
Chapter 52: Ayanami Trois
Chapter 53: Near the Ark
Chapter 54: Battle of the Gods
Chapter 55: At the End of the Road
Chapter 56: The Observers
Chapter 57: The Lance of Longinus
Part 12: Interlude
Chapter 58: Interlude
Part 13: Eva-02's Call
Chapter 59: After the Battle
Chapter 60: Unit Two's Voice

Chapter 61: Hikari's Contemplation
Chapter 62: Hikari's Homecoming
Omake: Concept Gallery
Postscript
Newsletter

"Toji! Our class rep is piloting that Eva!"
《That's ridiculous!》
The European Eva, Euro-II, appears from the clouds.
The Euro flying armada crosses the Arctic Ocean
to assault Hakone.
Helpless against the attacks, Super Eva is
toppled again and again onto Hokkaido's soil.


"So large... So near."
When she crosses the Longinus Curtain,
she sees what was hidden.
"If what I'm seeing is
real, then surely they
must be seeing this
from Earth, too."
EVA-02 ALLEGORICA
Unlimited Flight Type
Reconnaissance-in-Force Spec
Eva Unit-02 UC-1 Allegorica


"Humanity... lives... As long as they live...they shall not obtain wings...shall not be liberated. I mean you, Ikari-kun."
WINGS TO DELIVER FREEDOM FROM THE EARTH'S YOKE
Following Eva-02 Allegorica and Euro-II, Super Eva gains the ability to fly.
Whereas the former two came from a culmination of technological progress, Super Eva flies through force of strength.
VERTEX WINGS, FULLY EXTENDED
Unbalancing the source of lift (not aerodynamic force but from the A.T. Field) from the Eva's center of gravity decreases maneuverability and heightens stability. In presenting a choice between the two, the Vertex Wings exemplify Super Eva Type-F. But in the ongoing search for the right balance, the wings remain in the prototype stage.
Like everything else about Super Eva.
Eva-01 Type-F was engineered to be able to propel itself by creating a phase differential with its A.T. Field. Eva-01 hadn't been able to achieve flight with that technique, but as Super Eva, with the tremendous power flowing through its heart within the Center Trigonus in its chest, the Eva achieved flight through brute force.


The Eva that killed Shinji Ikari.
That's the Ark everyone's been searching for.
Because you're the one who made this world, Shinji.
"This was the site of a bloody battle between hundreds of Evangelions."
The gamma-ray laser cannon has fused with the Evangelion's arm. The weapon has been mangled—the transmitter gone, the nuclear excitement unit bent out of shape—but its observed output remains as designed.
Equipped with an external S² Engine, the Evangelion has unlimited operating time.
MUTANT EVA-0.0
One of the three Eva-0.0 units that had been placed in low Earth orbit. Armaros embedded its Q.R. Signum scale into the Eva's chest and induced extraordinary changes within the Eva and its pilot, Ayanami Rei Quatre, who have now gone rogue.

Unknowing of who or what she was,
and unable to remember her arrival here at the end of her long, long journey, the hulking giant kneeled, lowered her head, and became still.
《Asuka, do you accept no longer existing?》
At the sound of Shinji's voice, the mud giant jumped and began running away.
《What? Hey, wait!》

NEON GENESIS EVANGELION

ANIMA

VOLUME 2

BY
Ikuto Yamashita

CONCEPT
Khara

PLANNING & EDITING
Yasuo Kashihara

Seven Seas Entertainment

EVANGELION ANIMA VOL. 2

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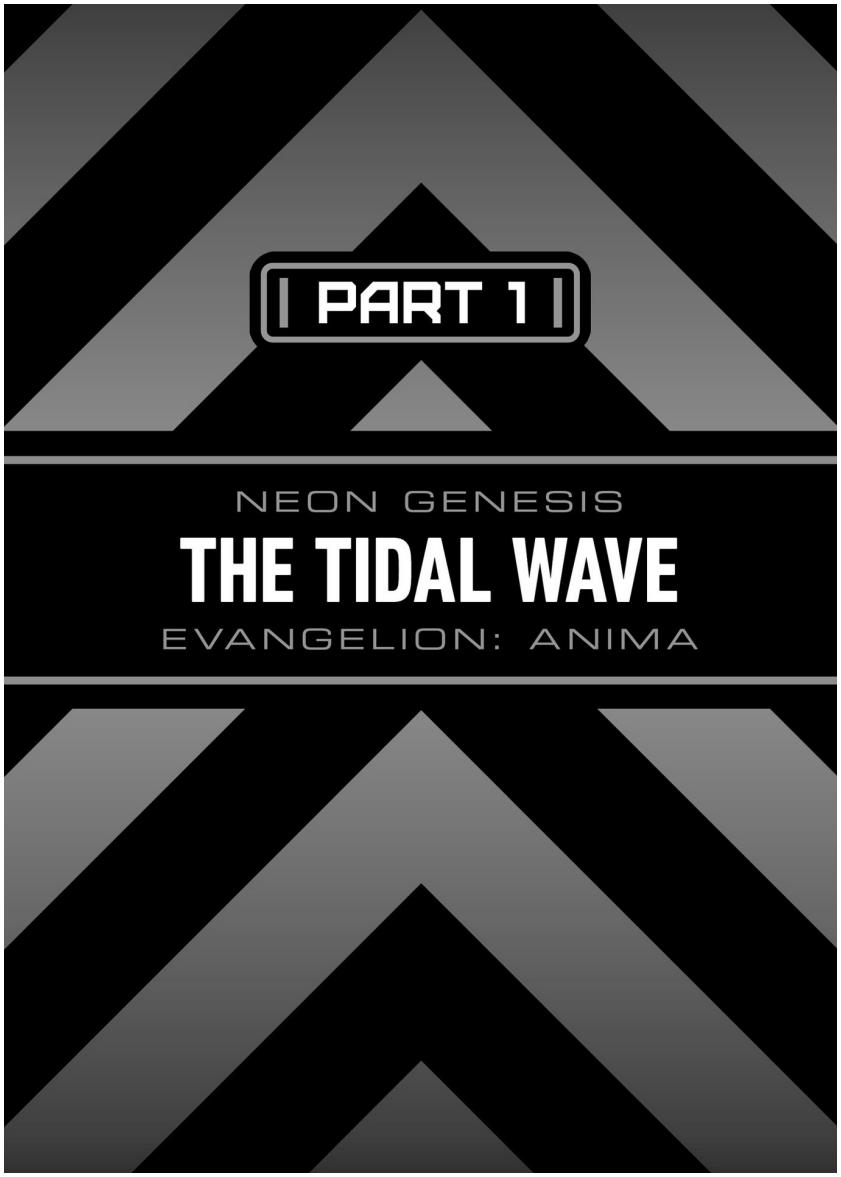
CONTENTS

PART 1 THE TIDAL WAVE
PART 2 THE LAST SEELE
PART 3 THE TWISTED GARDEN
PART 4 DEFIANCE
PART 5 ASUKA IN THE MOONLIGHT
PART 6 POLAR VORTEX
PART 7 BLACK THOUGHTS
PART 8 SOMEWHERE IN TIME
PART 9 THE ARK
PART 10 WITHIN THE CURTAIN
PART 11 BLACK AND PURPLE
PART 12 INTERLUDE
PART 13 EVA-02'S CALL
CONCEPT GALLERY


PART 1
NEON GENESIS
THE TIDAL WAVE
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 1:
The White Unit Two

WHEN NERV JAPAN'S command center in Hakone finally restored communications with Shinji in Hokkaido, the images sent by Super Eva's telemetry system threw the room into confusion.

Commander Katsuragi Misato had to say something. What she managed was, "Shinji-kun! Keep your distance!"

Facing off against Shinji wasn't the enemy ravaging the Earth but a fellow member of the human race—who had arrived piloting a winged white giant with huge clouds churning behind her.

Misato's eyes were fixed on the main screen. The commander reached for her communications handset and said, "Maya, are you seeing this? Have you heard anything about a *second* Unit Two?"

The winged giant appeared to be the same model Eva as Unit Two. Eva-02 had been constructed by Nerv Germany, and the UN forces deployed for disaster relief operations in Hokkaido came from European countries—including Germany. As Misato was making the connection, Ibuki Maya, the chief scientist and engineer, replied from her station in the cage.

"I have not," Maya said. "But speaking only to possibilities, Nerv Germany might have decided not to dispose of the surplus bodies from the construction of Unit Two."

< < Like how we still have all those leftover spines from Unit Zero underneath our feet? > >

"It's not hard to imagine someone hiding a complete body within the scrapheap… But constructing the physical body isn't the difficult part. It's stabilizing the core—infusing the Eva with a soul."

< < I got it. Thanks! > >

CLICK!

Maya had pulled the receiver away from her ear in anticipation of the thunderous click that always came the very moment Misato was finished speaking. The chief scientist had picked up that trick from her predecessor, Akagi Ritsuko.

To no one, Maya said, “But Commander Katsuragi, there’s a far more serious and pressing issue right now.”

The chief scientist leaned forward to look down at Eva-00 Type-F. She called down to the engineers on the lower deck.

“Start the warm-up procedures. We might have to sortie.”

Shinji’s cockpit display showed him the same picture that the command center was seeing.

“That Eva has Stage 2 armor,” he remarked, sounding puzzled, “and wings like the Allegorica, which we’ve only just made into a functional loadout. Those didn’t exist when Unit Two was built. Am I wrong, or has our current, most-advanced technology been leaked to someone on the outside?”

Rays of sunlight spilled through the gaps between the black clouds, making the floating white giant even more dazzling and radiant. The scene looked like a work of art—specifically, the sight reminded Shinji of religious paintings he’d seen in the high-res archives.

The Eva-02 had appeared to move with the clouds, materializing in their midst, although the idea seemed impossible. But the Eva hadn’t registered on Shinji’s radar until it came into direct view.

“Toji!” Shinji couldn’t help but call out to his friend, despite it being a breach of communications protocol. “Our class rep is piloting that Eva!”

Sounding confused, Toji replied, < < That’s ridiculous! > >

A fair assessment.

“Yeah, but…” Shinji and Super Eva shared one heart, and the young pilot was confident in his expanded senses.

That’s Horaki-san, he thought.

It was a strange feeling seeing the other Eva, which contained a mixture of the familiar, the friendly, and the repugnant. Several images flashed through Shinji’s mind. Eva-02. Horaki Hikari. And Asuka, who had disappeared on her way to the moon.

But those were all familiar and friendly images. So then where

was the repugnant part? Something about that white Eva-02 was… off.

Then he sensed a black presence from her two shoulder pylons.

“Armaros’ scales!”

Super Eva’s heart leaped.

THRUM!

Was this a repeat of Quatre’s Eva-0.0?

The Q.R. Signum had caused Rei Quatre’s Eva to go berserk. Q.R. Signums also powered the zombie-like Angel Carriers. Implanted with Armaros’ scales, the Carriers were drawn to the sound of Super Eva’s heartbeat, perhaps because they were dead and longed for a beating heart of their own. Seeing two Q.R. Signums here, on an Evangelion no less, deeply unsettled Super Eva.

THRUM!

Shinji’s body was one with his Eva, and he felt his own emotions begin to run wild, threatening to slip from his control.

Faced by a white Eva-02 bearing two Q.R. Signum scales, Super Eva’s fight-or-flight reflex was rapidly heading toward fight, but Shinji suppressed the impulse. “Class rep, are you under the Q.R. Signum’s control?”

The white Eva raised the cross-shaped tip of its spear.

< < The opposite. Nerv Germany has developed the technology to bring that black giant’s quantum resonance plates under our control. > >

The Eva-02 held out its spear to signal a forward advance. Behind the white giant, the clouds rumbled, followed by the roar of over a hundred jet turbines, as a swarm of aircraft burst through the cover and into sight. The planes sailed one after another over Super Eva’s head.

Taken by surprise, Super Eva took several steps backward as Shinji said, “Wh-what’s happening?!”

Unable to process the scene, Shinji and the Super Eva froze, becoming mere observers.

“Are those disaster relief forces?” Shinji asked, but the presence of fighter aircraft ruled out that possibility.

Where are they going? Shinji wondered. *South…toward Honshu.*

Chapter 2:
Plan Blood Red

THE MILITARY PLANES kept on coming, increasing in number, reaching and surpassing a battalion-sized force. The Nerv Japan command center in Tokyo-3 was in turmoil.

"They're not showing up on radar until they leave the clouds!" Aoba said.

"Okay, sure," Misato replied, "but where was their advance notice? What have we heard from them?"

"Nothing!"

The worst had come to pass. Not only did humanity face an unknown, external threat, but internal strife and a communication breakdown had pitted human against human. A murky unease began to wrap itself around Misato's thoughts.

She'd made many mistakes over the past three years—in the process of constructing a system that would prevent the Angels from ever acting against humankind again—and she had forced demands upon every nation in the world, including Japan.

No, she reminded herself. *You knew the risks. Get ahold of yourself!*

"No one panic," she barked. "We need to assess the situation. Reach the UN Security Council's office and find out what's going on. What can the visual feed tell us about the makeup of these military forces? They certainly don't look like the disaster relief units the UN promised us."

"The aircraft are a mix of European countries," a technician replied. "Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Spain… From the serial numbers we can see, we could be looking at an air convoy for transporting ground troops."

"The public broadcast channels are being overridden," Aoba interjected. He switched the main audio input.

< < People of Japan. > >

Toji recognized the class rep's voice immediately. Shinji had been right. His mouth dropped, and he said, "What the hell?"

As the clouds continued to spew forth their armada, the white giant announced herself.

< < We are a United Nations rapid response force authorized by UN Resolution 508 regarding the deployment of Evangelions. This Evangelion is Euro-II Heurtebise, vanguard of the UN forces.

< < The European continent suffered tremendous losses because of Nerv Japan's negligence. Furthermore, Nerv Japan is currently engaged in efforts to seize power for themselves. They are on their way to becoming a violent organization no longer in accordance with the ideals set out in the UN Charter.

< < Accordingly, the UN has deemed Nerv Japan unfit to operate the Evangelions, which ultimately are UN property. The UN has ordered the reclamation of Nerv Japan's equipment and facilities.

< < Therefore, this deployment of UN military forces is nothing more than an internal reorganization within the UN structure. Do not be alarmed by our presence. The purpose of this mission is to restore Nerv Japan to a properly functioning organization within the UN and will cause no harm or impediment to the Japanese nation or its citizens. > >

Across every transmission frequency and twenty-four-hour news site, the class representative made her declaration in soft, smooth tones, but something about her voice sounded wrong to Toji. It was lifeless.

< < She sounds like she's asleep, > > Shinji said.

CLANG!

Heads turned as the sudden noise reverberated through the command center. Misato had kicked over a steel cart stuffed with paper manuals for use in an emergency.

"Negligent?!" the commander shouted. "Who the *hell* are they calling negligent?! *They're* the ones who shoved all the responsibility onto us. *They're* the ones who insisted we attack the

Lance of Longinus. And *this* is what we get for it?"

She turned her glare to the room and said, "Put the base on the highest alert level."

Gingerly, Hyuga asked, "What is the subject of the alert?"

"Humans. Initiate Plan Blood Red."

Hyuga leaned forward in surprise. "But…that's for responding to an international military conflict. Are you suggesting the EU has crossed the Arctic Ocean to attack us?" Hyuga paused as the situation sank in. "Right. That's what we're seeing, isn't it?"

Suddenly self-conscious of his posture, Hyuga sat up straight. "That plan requires permission not only from the Japanese government but from the UN—and the opposing force is operating through a UN resolution."

Misato snorted. "No, I don't think they are. If there had been a vote, we would have heard about it. I think something has forced them to play their hand early. Those are Q.R. Signums on that Eva, so we're going to classify it as an Angel Carrier. We have the authority to defend ourselves when faced with an emergent threat; we can use that authority to obtain permission after the fact. And you can believe I have a lot of questions for the Japanese government. That military convoy is flying south, and yet the JSSDF hasn't responded."

"Ah…" Hyuga said. The Japanese government was tacitly permitting the passage of European forces through Japanese sovereign territory.

For a moment, the room went quiet as the Nerv staff thought back to the battle three years prior, when JSSDF special forces assaulted Nerv HQ.

"If we're too slow to react and let the city be taken, we're finished. We need to pay close attention to the JSSDF's movements. This time, if they cross the caldera, we'll have to respond. Yes, Acting Deputy Commander Suzuhara, what is it?"

Looking glum, Toji had his hand half-raised. "I'd like permission," he said, "to fly there—to Hokkaido."

Misato glanced at the intelligence division's report on her personal display. While they hadn't been able to rule out the

possibility that the Eva's pilot was an imposter, her voice print matched that of Horaki Hikari, resident of Tokyo-3 and second-year student at Sengokuhara High School, who had gone missing along with her family. Of course, Misato was aware of Toji's private life.

How was it that Asuka had described them? "They've gotten stuck in a rut. Not growing closer, not growing distant. Familiarity without direction."

The commander shook her head. "No one leaves HQ until we have a handle on the situation. We need to select a pilot for the Unit Zero Type-F."

< < It can't be Rei Trois. > > Maya replied instantly from the cage. < < She's still reeling from the mental reverberations of Cinq's death. > >

Misato clicked her tongue in irritation. "Of course their mental mirroring only works when it's inconvenient. That leaves little Ayanami—Six. Acting Deputy Commander!"

Reluctantly, Toji responded. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Coordinate our anti-air response with Six's Unit Zero Type-F as the linchpin." Then, in a conciliatory but firm tone, she said, "Look, even if I gave you permission to go to Hokkaido, that trip just isn't possible right now. The north is in turmoil from all the earthquakes, and anyway, you'd inevitably cross paths with that armada heading south. Do what you can here and now."

"We're under electronic attack!" Hyuga announced. "Six's unmanned orbital Eva 0.0 has begun receiving a large volume of signals from a dozen satellites and twenty-three terrestrial broadcast locations."

"There they go!" Misato said, shaking her head. "What a waste of precious bandwidth. Who knows how long we'll even have any satellites left? Suzuhara, have Six sever mental connection with her Eva before she gets a transmission overload."

Toji didn't acknowledge his commander's order. Or rather, he hadn't even processed it. Why was Hikari in Hokkaido? Why was she piloting that mysterious Eva? He wanted to fly straight to her and get some answers.

Toji slapped himself on the cheek and then composed himself. “If we do that, then *we* won’t be able to access the Eva, either.”

“Set the support AI to mimic a pilot’s responses. If the Eva goes completely unresponsive, someone might try to capture it or shoot it down.”

“Understood.”

“And Suzuhara,” Misato added reassuringly, “one step at a time.”

“I’ll go get Six,” Toji said.

Misato said, “I’m seeing some changes around your vicinity, Super Eva.”

Her display showed several small dots in motion around Eva-01 in the northern expanse. *Did the enemy lower ground troops?*

“Shinji, you mustn’t let them surround you. Withdraw! Avoid engaging if at all possible and get out of there.”

The European Eva had likely been sent to keep Super Eva pinned down in Hokkaido after luring it away from Hakone.

But will the white giant take direct action?

< < Wh-where should I go? > > Shinji asked.

A natural question. He was a single point among a throng of enemies. And whichever direction he moved, that was what he’d remain. Shinji’s Super Eva was isolated, without support—and it was surely only a matter of time before the enemy shut off his telemetry feed as well.

“Aoba,” Misato said, “I need you to figure out some way to keep that telemetry feed connected. The drone we have with Unit One can easily be shot down, and once they start jamming the signal, we won’t have any idea what’s happening to Super Eva.”

“Understood. They’ll figure out before long that we’re using lasers to communicate. I can buy us some time by using compression and switching Unit One’s telemetry laser to operate in bursts, but I still think they’ll home in on our satellite in no time… I’ll think of something.”

Chapter 3:
The Noose Tightens

THE FLYING ARMADA didn't simply pass Super Eva by on their way south.

The fighter aircraft began dispersing something all around Super Eva. Moments later, the material—some kind of fuel-air bomb—exploded, flattening the earth in a ring around the Eva. Before the smoke cleared, a swarm of large cargo planes appeared with their low-pressure tires deployed. They came swooping down so fast that they looked like they were in free fall.

Not even bothering to come to a stop, the cargo planes opened their rear hatches and began spewing out armored vehicles of every type and size; the largest were equipped with rectangular antennas.

"What are they doing?" Shinji wondered aloud as the vehicles began circling his Eva.

They remained just outside the boundaries of his A.T. Field. Kicking up soil with their caterpillar tracks, the armored vehicles kept circling, neither approaching nor drawing away.

Shinji followed the ring of vehicles with his eyes. It made him dizzy. He didn't know how he should respond.

Just then, a light flashed along Euro-II's Allegorica wings.

"What?!" In that first moment, Shinji couldn't tell what had happened.

Super Eva lost contact with the ground and fell sideways. Euro-II thrust its long spear. Super Eva rolled to the side, just barely dodging the untelegraphed attack, but Shinji felt a crackling sensation along his A.T. Field and knew that the weapon would pass right through his defenses.

What just happened? Did those Allegorica wings somehow project its gravitational manipulation? That's not possible.

Misato's crackling voice came from the cockpit's speakers, as if the signal had only barely managed to cross the distance.

< < Shinji-kun, get out of there! They're trying to keep you pinned down! Hurry and— > >

The link to the command center disconnected mid-sentence.

"Misato-san?!"

Shinji—or rather, Super Eva—stood up.

"I don't know what you're trying, but I can jump out from this ring faster than the blink of an eye."

But before he could jump, the Allegorica wings flashed again. The light seemed to bend, and suddenly Super Eva's legs were scraping deep into the dirt. Instead of leaping, the giant had tumbled onto its side again. This time, Euro-II's spear sliced through Super Eva's right shoulder and severed the pylon.

Euro-II had descended to the ground and stood before Super Eva as the toppled giant struggled to pick itself back up.

Possessing a human-shaped body, Super Eva's movements were fundamentally grounded in its hips, which, supported by two legs, provided all the balance for the lower body. Now, this ultimate being, whose capabilities were supposed to be limitless, flailed its limbs uselessly in the dirt.

In confusion, Super Eva lashed out at everything that touched it, but the only enemy within reach was the cold ground. The Eva couldn't stand, and the more Shinji struggled, the more he began to panic.

He was truly in danger.

Chapter 4:
Six's Attack

IF THE ROUND HAKONE CALDERA were the face of a clock, with Mount Hakone at the center, Lake Ashi occupied the seven to ten-o'clock range, and Tokyo-3 and Nerv Japan's headquarters covered ten and eleven.

On Mount Komagatake—technically one of the many peaks of the greater Mount Hakone—stood a variety of antennas, automated defense systems, and a heavily armored sniping post designed for Eva-00 Type-F.

With one functional leg, Eva-00 Type-F wasn't built for running and instead arrived by underground transport and a slowly ascending elevator. Its tiny pilot, Ayanami Rei Six, her breath burbling through the LCL of her entry plug, checked that the alignment of the barrel on her baryon accelerator cannon was within acceptable tolerances. The weapon—code-named "Angel's Backbone"—replaced the Eva's entire right arm, and its right leg had been discarded in favor of a firing stand with more stability.

"Okay," Six said, satisfied with her weapon's condition.

Currently, the mental mirroring between the multiple Ayanamis had broken down, and individuality had begun to awaken within each girl. But of all the Ayanami clones, the most lacking in expression of individuality was Rei Trois, and her Eva-00 Type-F remained largely a blank slate. For Six to pilot the Eva, the only adjustments necessary had been on the level of repositioning the driver's seat in a car. Once the plug had been swapped out for one made to fit Six's diminutive, seven-year-old-sized body, the Eva had successfully launched.

When she received her targets' incoming trajectories, Six immediately began firing. With this data, targeting the planes wasn't out of the realm of possibility, but the air battalion was still far beyond the horizon. For the time being, Six instead targeted the missiles soaring toward Hakone on a ballistic course.

The analysis from the command center concluded that the incoming projectiles were most likely to be cluster munitions that had not yet dispersed.

It wasn't likely that Nerv Japan would be facing N_2 ground-penetrating bombs—not when their opponents' goal was to seize their facilities and resources—but air-burst N_2 warheads remained a possibility, as did ultra-low-frequency explosives, assuming the headquarters' earthquake-dampening structure was a known secret. And for now, that seemed a safe assumption.

The missiles' trajectories weren't necessarily fixed—even without dispersing the cluster munitions, the projectiles could drop mass to alter their flight. They may have had other means of changing course as well. Mid-flight attitude control was by no means new tech.

Each shot from Six's cannon split the missiles into more and more fragments. Typically, the debris could have been excluded from the targeting data, but some of the unexploded warheads might have been hiding among it, so the number of targets gradually increased.

Each appeared as one of the increasingly numerous pinpoints on the cockpit's display, accompanied by spectral analysis, size, and an automatically generated ID number.

Beneath the giant's feet, all roads leading to Tokyo-3 had been closed down, and the city's fortified sectors had been deployed.

Chapter 5:
The Dance Continues

SUPER EVA CONTINUED to face relentless attacks.

Each time the giant tried to rise, its pivoting leg would suddenly lose contact with the ground, and it would topple over once more. Then came the Euro-II's spear thrust. The pattern continued in an endless loop. Attack vehicles among the circling armored convoy began shooting at Super Eva, along with gunships from overhead. With its A.T. Field deployed, the Eva would normally have been impervious to conventional weapons, but the field was weakening, and its outer armor had begun to take damage.

"Class rep, stop!" Shinji cried. His mind was beginning to get hazy. "Wake up!"

< < That's a funny thing to say, Ikari-kun. I'm not the class representative anymore. *You* are. > >

That was true, Shinji remembered with a start. In his second-year class, Shinji had been elected the class representative, with Hikari his number two.

"But…it doesn't feel like I am. I haven't been going to school much…"

She didn't respond. For a moment, Hikari had sounded like herself, but the moment passed, and she seemed asleep again.

Why was I *chosen to be the class rep, anyway?*

Kaworu's words echoed in Shinji's mind.

You've performed too well in this world. That's why the girl in red was at the center of the Instrumentality Project—you weren't a suitable representative of humanity. I suspect in the next world, you'll be more isolated.

But even then, I will…

The voice trailed off.

Nerv Japan held three Magi AI units, and one was currently devoted to repelling the cyberattack and anticipating how the attack might evolve.

The JSSDF garrison stationed near Hakone hadn't mobilized, but they weren't acting as allies, either. All incoming requests for information were answered with a looping, prerecorded message: "All lines are currently closed due to a large-scale cyberattack." Meanwhile, the military base to the north was jamming the skies.

"Are we supposed to believe they're trying to disorient our guests coming from the north?" Misato asked. "Because I think all this jamming is actually meant to mask the fleet's approach."

Nerv Japan had sent out several guided weapons and surveillance drones from Tokyo-3 toward Super Eva's location, but all had been shot down before they could accomplish anything. Misato was beginning to feel impatient, and she, like Toji, wished she could fly to Hokkaido herself.

Hyuga had gone to Maya's science lab to assist with analyzing the new Euro-II Evangelion, and presently the pair returned to the command center.

When Misato greeted them with a look of aggravated impatience, the technician winced and said, "We… We think we have an idea of what's going on."

"And what is it?"

Maya sent a still image from her tablet to Misato's display. "Those circling armored vehicles appear to be carrying quantum-wave mirrors."

I've heard that term before, Misato thought. *But where?*

Seeing her expression of unsure recollection, Hyuga offered, "Like in Super Eva's chest piece."

Misato was surprised. "What does that mean?"

"When Unit One's S^2 Engine went haywire," Maya said, "it opened up a hole to multidimensional space, allowing instabilities in space-time to come through to our side. But with the quantum wave mirrors, we were able to reflect those instabilities back upon themselves and contain them in the form of a heartbeat. Look at this picture."

A CG-animated diagram appeared over the still image, showing power generated by Euro-II bouncing back and forth inside the ring of vehicles.

"From this picture," Misato said, "it looks like those vehicles aren't just echoing but *amplifying* the waves of localized gravity generated by the Allegorica system."

Maya nodded. "And those mirrors are acting as a gravitational lens to project the gravity elsewhere."

"So then, the ring of vehicles is acting like the inner walls of Super Eva's chest, and the mirrors are trapping the projected gravitational waves and bouncing them around. Okay, I get that. But surely the gravity can't be all that strong, right?"

"It doesn't have to be," Maya answered. "Applied during motion, or right after the Eva stops, a little bit of force wouldn't be able to throw the giant off-balance. But if an attacker aimed at the very beginning of an Eva's movement and timed it just right, that's another story. Evangelions are gigantic and strong, but as long as they look and move like us, they can't escape the weaknesses inherent to the human body."

Misato sighed. "I know it's not what's important right now, but it really pisses me off that all the tricks of our enemy's newest weapon come directly from *our* tech. If we make it through this in one piece, the intelligence department will have a lot of explaining to do."

The mood in the command center had turned rather gloomy, when Aoba said to himself with an almost inappropriate level of glee, "All right! Here we go!"

The technicians and Misato turned. With all eyes upon him, Aoba's expression grew sheepish. "Er, sorry. But take a look at the main screen."

The northern battleground had reappeared, and at once, the mood brightened.

Super Eva was in rough shape, but at least it was still moving.

"Whoa!" Misato gasped. "Where is this video coming from? Is

it just me, or is this the view from the *opposite* position?"

Signal interference had previously interrupted the video of the showdown between Super Eva and the Euro-II. This new video's resolution left something to be desired, but—Misato glanced at the time on the display—the image seemed to be live. Super Eva was clearly on the ropes, but…

He's still alive.

"Well spotted," Aoba said. "We're watching the feed from the aggressor's side—the United Nations Armed Forces Religious Riot Control, Third Brigade."

Misato pictured the face of that UN "advisor" who had suggested Shinji's visit to Hokkaido. She hadn't liked the man from the start.

Angrily, the commander said, "So those so-called relief forces have been behind this whole thing!"

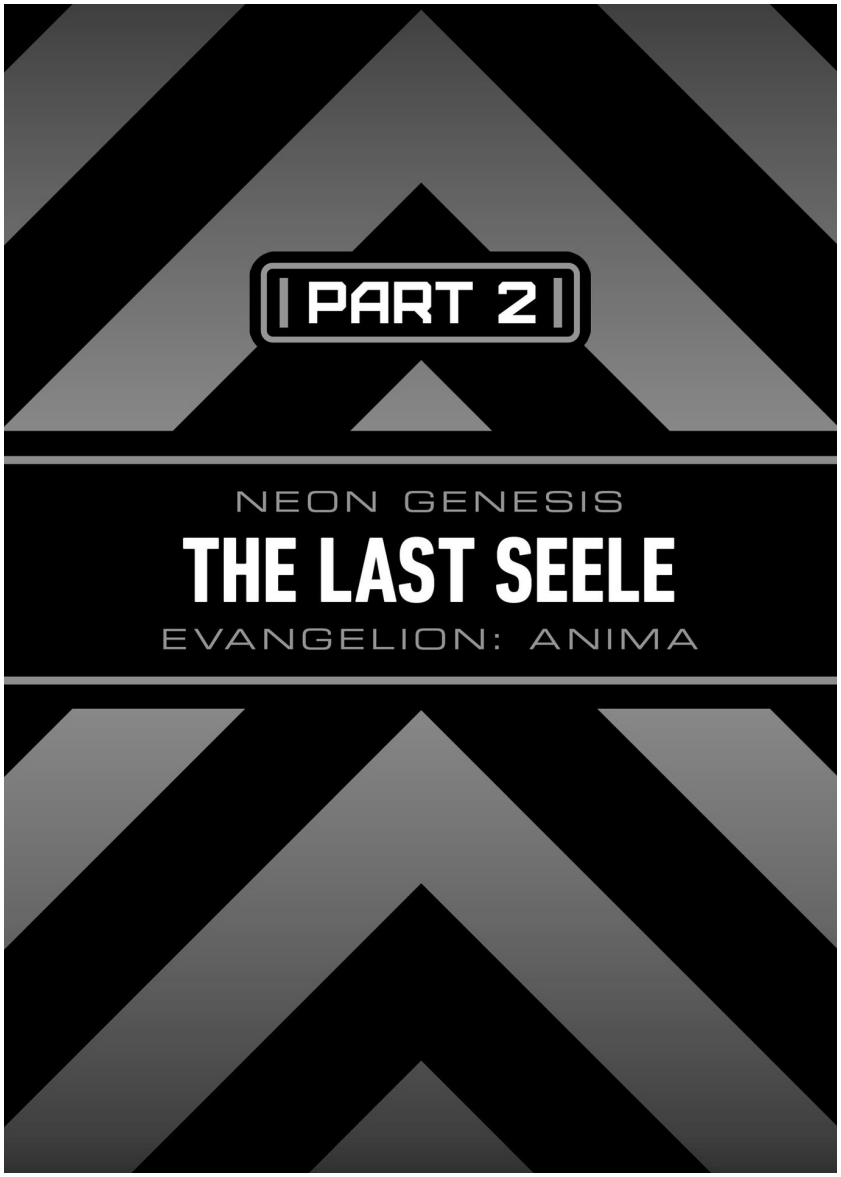
"They were the advance guard," Maya added.

"The source signal has been heavily modified," Aoba said, "and I don't know for sure how many places it's being sent, but two streams are being received by our dear friends. One to Tokyo-2—that is, New Ichigaya—and another to the prime minister's underground disaster response center. New Ichigaya was harder to attack, so I'm doing a little borrowing from the latter."

The national government had known about this from the start.

"And I suppose we still can't communicate with Shinji-kun," Misato said.

"Sure we can." Aoba answered casually. "It's a two-way link. But they'll cut us off immediately, so we'll only get one chance."


PART 2
NEON GENESIS
THE LAST SEELE
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 6:
Resistance

ADEPTLY USING the gravitational fields produced by its wings, Euro-II barely touched the soft soil as it approached, its cross-shaped spear held aloft. Meanwhile, Super Eva was crawling in the earth, caked in mud, all attempts to get back on its feet continuously and utterly thwarted. It could do nothing but dodge the oncoming blows.

Crack!

Another piece of Super Eva's armor was torn away.

The boundary of Shinji's A.T. Field was weakening, his mental state pushed to the breaking point. Every time he'd nearly gotten to his feet, he'd come crashing back down again. It was torture. The mental image of being stuck—writhing on the ground, never to escape—mentally and emotionally exhausted him, snatching away all positive thoughts.

Shinji rolled around, attempting to sweep away the circling vehicles and escape their ring, but his arms couldn't reach far enough. He would remain an eternal prisoner.

Even if Super Eva had come equipped with a pallet rifle, or another similar weapon, hitting moving targets at such close range would have been difficult. Something that would have been simple for even a low-grade automated-turret could still be hard for an Eva.

Even with their preposterous power and fast reaction times, Evangelions were overly reliant on the mind of a single human. Unlike automated systems, they couldn't freely redistribute their pilots' attention as needed. And right now, Euro-II was commanding the vast majority of Shinji's attention.

Every weapon designed to be used by the Evangelions was entirely focused on overwhelming penetration strength. They weren't the kind of weapons made for suppressing smaller, spread-out enemies. This was the natural result of years spent battling enemies like the Angels, who were staggeringly massive and

possessed incredibly resilient shields.

"I can't even touch the damn army!" Shinji fumed.

He tried to stand, but that invisible hand yanked him back down. What Shinji needed now, more than anything, was someone else's eyes. He was stuck with only what he could see directly in front of him, and without the perspective of an outside observer, he would never realize that the circling vehicles were using quantum wave mirrors to reflect the artificial gravitational fields generated by Euro-II's Allegorica wings, throwing Super Eva's legs just the slightest bit off-balance every time he tried to stand up. Shinji—Super Eva—was empty-handed, having already tossed his prog knives in an attempt to break open the ring, an attempt that had been guaranteed to fail. The weapons had disappeared into the dirt cloud with no effect. Meanwhile, Shinji had nearly exhausted his ability to evade Euro-II's spear thrusts. His time was running out.

Just then, a musical electronic tone chimed, and the communications window appeared on Shinji's display. A familiar voice floated through the LCL.

< < Shinji! > >

After a pause, Shinji responded, "Toji?"

< < You need to wake that dazed Hikari! > >

The signal was coming in over short-range laser, and without any encryption. The source was identified as the United Nations Armed Forces Religious Riot Control, Third Brigade. The transmission protocol had been set up when the UN was still their ally—an ally Shinji had never expected to face as an enemy. But here they were.

Shinji tried to ask, "Why are you talking to me through *their* network?" but Toji spoke over him.

< < Try it like you're breakdancing, or a gymnast on a pommel horse. All you gotta do is get up. Doesn't matter how. Before they flip you over again, shift your balance onto a different point. Then reach out and— > >

The transmission suddenly cut off. The signal disappeared, and the communications window closed.

Aoba's plan went exactly as the technician had expected, including—unfortunately—his surmise that the link would be quickly severed once they revealed they'd gained access to the prime minister's communication link. Toji had hardly been able to provide much guidance at all.

Shinji looked dumbfounded, like a pigeon hit by a peashooter. But in that moment, he saw what he had to do.

"That's right…" he said. "I need to wake her up."

With a goal at last, Super Eva emerged from its torpor and sprang into action.

The Nerv Japan command center once again lost its video feed of the battle, and the display went completely dark except for the words "NO SIGNAL."

"Ah, damn it!" Toji exclaimed. Aoba and Hyuga turned to him simultaneously.

"Deputy Commander," Aoba scolded, "I told you the link would get shut down immediately!"

"Come on, Deputy Commander!" Hyuga said. "You were supposed to tell him about the enemy's gravity system!"

Sheepishly, Toji said, "S-sorry."

What Shinji hadn't been told was that, according to Maya's observations, though the European military vehicles circled Super Eva in a seemingly disorganized manner, a specific five vehicles, equipped with quantum wave mirrors on gimbals and vibration-dampening mounts, maintained a precise formation around Shinji.

From its new home in the dirt, Super Eva ceased its attempts to stand.

"Are you giving up?" Hikari asked, as the Euro-II thrust its spear once more.

Super Eva's upper body remained still, but then something swept swiftly across the ground from behind Super Eva's back, like a hand on a clockface. Too late, Hikari realized it was the Eva's leg, gliding in the opposite direction of the revolving convoy and catching the drivers by surprise with a longer-than-expected reach.

Super Eva's foot smashed into a truck and sent it tumbling from the circle.

" *Assistant* Class Representative Horaki!" Shinji shouted, finally using her correct title.

Continuing its sweep, Super Eva's leg struck the Euro-II's spear mid-thrust. The weapon flew from the white giant's grasp. Super Eva snatched the spear out of the air and used it to stand.

< < Shinji? > > Hikari asked, sounding like she'd just been awakened from a deep slumber.

Shinji glared furiously at the scales that dirtied the chalk-white Eva-02's shoulders. "Those things are making you do this!" he shouted.

Shinji didn't understand how Armaros' Q.R. Signum scales had become embedded in Euro-II's shoulders. But in Hikari, he saw Rei Quatre, whom the scales had tragically turned into a fugitive. Whatever was happening, his classmate's actions clearly weren't born of a sound mind.

Which leaves me only one course of action!

Before Euro-II could leap backward and break away, Super Eva thrust the stolen spear deep into its right shoulder. Using its free hand, Super Eva grabbed Euro-II's arm and ripped the limb off, Q.R. Signum and all.

This savage bit of field surgery risked sending Hikari into shock, but the feedback might also help awaken her hazy consciousness.

Still, Shinji sensed something from her thoughts that he hadn't expected. If he'd been old enough to remember vinyl records, he might have compared the sensation to a needle skipping across the grooves, replaying the same section over and over again. Hikari's mind was stuck in an endless loop of terror as she watched… *something* turning into a pillar of salt.

"What," Shinji gasped, "is that?"

Having lost the Q.R. Signum, Euro-II's body began to disintegrate from the right shoulder, but then the scales on the other shoulder began to glow. The destruction slowed and then

reversed.

"Are the scales maintaining the Eva's shape, like the Angel Carriers?"

If so, what would that mean? The Carriers were made from the corpses of the mass-production Evangelions. Does this Eva, like them, have no core?

Without flinching, the white Eva-02 reached down with its remaining arm, drew the sword from the sheath at its waist, and began swinging.

"Don't you feel pain?! What was that vision you showed me?"

Shinji didn't know that Hikari's sister had been exposed to the Lance of Longinus's light in Europe and had been turned into a crumbling pillar of salt. But the strange vision seemed like a shroud over Hikari's consciousness.

Quatre made direct contact with the Q.R. Signum and was mentally contaminated. But this feels like something is between *Horaki-san and the Signum—something like the dummy plug system?*

As Shinji deflected Euro-II's sword strike, he realized the remaining armored vehicles were moving into a new formation.

"They're trying to trip me again!"

But they didn't. Instead, a rumbling, footstep-like sound emanated from the convoy.

THRUM!

Shinji gasped in surprise. "That sound!"

They were mimicking Super Eva's heartbeat.

By inducing a resonance in the artificial gravity generated by Euro-II's Allegorica wings, the armored vehicles were imitating Super Eva's heartbeat—the echoing background cadence of space-time.

THRUM!

"What the hell are you trying to do?" Shinji demanded.

When the false heartbeat grew louder than Super Eva's actual pulse, Euro-II's severed arm—still in Super Eva's grasp—began to

reach for its former owner.

Shinji yelped and reflexively released the arm.

In all the previous battles against the Angel Carriers, the Q.R. Signum scales had abruptly disintegrated as soon as they were damaged or removed from their host body. Shinji had expected the same would happen today.

But the pseudo-heartbeat was calling the Q.R. Signum back to its host body. The scales were drawn to Super Eva's heartbeat—a fact Shinji's opponents were now exploiting.

As if possessing free will, the severed arm pushed off the ground with its palm and leaped into the air. Euro-II caught it and placed it against the shoulder from which it had been torn.

"I get it," Shinji said. "You found a way to summon an Angel Carrier to an Eva without a core."

Once the Q.R. Signum had re-fused with its host body, the artificial parts began to come back to life. In moments, the arm was as good as new. Shinji wondered if this same process was how the engineers of Nerv Germany had built Euro-II in the first place.

The human imagination knew no bounds. Humanity could be faced with a task that seemed utterly impossible, but when any new phenomenon appeared—no matter what threat it might pose—people would use it to create a way forward.

Shinji shuddered.

THRUM!

By swallowing this poison, couldn't a person become poison themselves? Couldn't this bring about some new, unforeseen calamity?

Amid the reverberations of the false heartbeat, Super Eva's own heart began to beat louder, responding to Shinji's agitation. A dreadful chill ran down Shinji's spine.

He felt all the hairs on his body stand on end. Super Eva reacted instantly, springing off from the ground in a giant backward leap as countless white arms began sprouting from the soil.

Except there wasn't soil there anymore, just a giant black hole from which the white arms reached out, bending this way and that.

They were all Angel Carrier arms. Mysterious scenery came into view within the empty space that framed the arms. *Are those… ruins?* For a brief moment, Shinji caught a glimpse of an intricate glass structure, but then two quantum-wave mirror trucks fell into the void, and it vanished.

Well…that was unexpected.

Euro-II had taken to the sky and was now retreating. Had Hikari seen what he'd seen ?

Chapter 7:
A Black Cloud

AFTER EMERGING from Euro-II's clouds, the UN rapid response force had proceeded south, crossing the Tsugaru Strait and reaching the skies above Honshu. To the west, toward continental Asia, they could see the long shimmering streaks of an aurora. After the Lance of Longinus began orbiting the Earth, auroras had become more common farther away from the poles. The Longinus Curtain reflected and focused the sunlight, which heated the air and created disturbances in the electromagnetic field in the upper atmosphere. Rippling sheets of rainbow-colored plasma had descended over the skies even this far south.

On a transport plane filled with soldiers, a crew member checked the status of the plane's electromagnetic shield. Seeing that the reading was normal, they said, "We didn't even need to ask the Japanese to employ their electronic countermeasures. This atmospheric disturbance alone would have been enough to hide us. I'd say things are looking up."

In truth, their deployment had been rushed.

Nerv Japan's monopoly on, and authoritarian use of, the Evangelions was resented not only by the European nations, but nations all over the world. After Eva production had stalled in America, the Eurozone banded together to usurp the authority to control the giants. The most heavily involved was Germany, whose Nerv branch still keenly felt that Unit-02 had been unfairly taken from them. Then their moment came, or rather, they created one. Working through the UN, they ordered Nerv Japan to investigate the surface of the moon, thereby leaving the base without Eva-02, the most reliable of their Evas and the one with the most field time, and Cinq's Eva-0.0, which had been brought down from orbit for inspection. Another key component of their plan was manipulating public opinion after the attack on the Lance of Longinus resulted in millions of people across Europe turning into pillars of salt.

Russia was supposed to be their partner in the operation, offering a united front and the use of their military bases. But when

the great earthquake occurred beneath the Kamchatka Peninsula, Russia suddenly backed out. To make matters worse, global disasters further confused the flow of information. With the operation facing almost certain delay, the military leadership sent out an advance unit for resupply and reconnaissance. But then Super Eva had appeared unannounced on the plains of northern Hokkaido, which was supposed to be the European forces' beachhead. Had their plot been leaked? It appeared that it hadn't, but happenstance had left the Hakone caldera even more understaffed than before. Information and orders became muddled up and down the chain of command. In ordinary circumstances, this might not have been too much to handle. But the world was in chaos. For one, the Longinus Curtain had begun setting fire to places all over the globe. When a portion of the European forces mistakenly thought they'd been given the order to launch the assault, the rest saw no option but to commit.

But even though the operation began in confusion, it was proceeding along the planned timetable, and with Super Eva pinned down by Euro-II, the mission was going even better than expected.

The guided missiles coming out of the Hakone caldera were all being jammed, and the unguided rockets were being shot down. The mixed air battalion flew low, staying out of the path of Eva-00 Type-F's ultra-long-ranged shots. Mount Fuji towered to the west; all that was left was to cross the backcountry and assault Nerv Japan and Tokyo-3.

One by one, the European pilots noticed a most peculiar sight. A black cloud had begun to spread across the west with unreal speed, almost as if in a time-lapse video.

The attacking forces had arranged for electromagnetic jamming to conceal their invasion, which precluded the use of their own radar systems, but they'd known what weather to expect.

Any use of active detection systems, including sonar, radar, lidar, and infrared beams, was the same as searching for someone in the dark by shining a flashlight—the light would always reveal the searcher first. Consequently, the European armada wasn't using any active detection methods; if the need arose, they would get the information they needed from Airborne Early Warning and Control aircraft stationed out of range, and even then, the fleet wouldn't

transmit any acknowledgement in response. There was no sense in needlessly revealing their location to the enemy.

The AEW&C aircraft above the Sea of Japan hadn't sent any information about the moving cloud. The next scheduled transmission was in—

An object struck the transport plane, followed by another. The inside of the fuselage rumbled with a sound like scattering dirt and sand. The black cloud rose from below, and the aircraft passed inside it. A mass of little blots coated the canopy and left the pilot momentarily unable to see.

Are those…squashed bugs?

The cloud was a tremendous swarm of locusts.

With no time to change course, the European mixed air battalion flew directly into the swarm, which moved freely, changing shape as if it were made of weightless liquid. When the leading aircraft disappeared, having been swallowed by the cloud, the trailing craft lifted the communications ban. But the Japanese military below didn't get the message right away, and the jamming continued. The convoy attempted to fly out of the cloud, but in every possible direction of escape, the locusts advanced ahead of them.

A few pathfinder squadrons managed to successfully break away to a higher altitude, and the squadrons that followed them were able to escape above the swarm, but the vast majority of aircraft continued to be swallowed by the black cloud.

Post Second Impact, military-purpose engines had been made with a focus on durability over efficiency. Such engines could easily have shrugged off a sucked-in insect or two. But the unnaturally dense swarm of locusts slowly sapped the engines' outputs, and before the pilots knew it, their planes began to lose altitude. Typically, the wind would have swept away any bugs that struck the aircraft, but they were so numerous that the wipers ceased to move. The active sensors were jammed by the electromagnetic storm, and the lidar and passive sensors had been stopped up or destroyed by insect carcasses. The flood of faulty information left the navigation systems inoperational. Beneath canopies painted over by locusts, the pilots tried to redirect their planes with no instruments to guide them, but by then, the rudders had been

rendered inoperative anyway. Within the lightless cloud, the most technologically advanced flying machines of Europe had been reduced to coffins of carbon fiber and aluminum. Some crews attempted to discharge their passengers mid-flight, but their parachutes were immediately shredded by the giant mass of bugs. The planes' cargos, both human and object, were sucked out and scattered into the sky, where they could do nothing but obey the law of gravity.

The ones who had been lucky enough to fly higher and survive the cloud were pummeled by the tungsten rain from Nerv Japan's HARM missiles or else lost their engines to self-guided missiles. Still, roughly a third of the original forces managed to change course, heading back the way they'd come, at a higher altitude now. The original contingency plan had been to escape west, but the locust cloud had come from that direction, and the aurora's electromagnetic storm prevented communication with China.

They had come on a mission but accomplished nothing. Nature cared nothing for the circumstances of humanity.

Adding insult to injury—or rather, injury to injury—the JSSDF anti-air sites, which had watched their approach with tacit approval, now fired parting shots after the fleeing fleet, whittling down the survivors even further.

From Tokyo-2—a.k.a. New Ichigaya—the Japanese government made a show of their renewed allegiance to Nerv Japan by sharing a video feed that revealed Super Eva standing as the victor. But by that time, they'd already lifted the ECM and satellite disruptions, and Shinji had reported via a public power company's infrastructure that Euro-II had flown away to the north. For the time being, Nerv Japan didn't know the exact scale of the disaster the black cloud had wrought, and they had no way of knowing why the European airborne forces had called off their invasion. The locusts would continue to swarm for several days.

"I don't understand what just happened…" Toji said.

Misato contemplated, "I wonder if the attack is over."

"And how are we gonna settle this?" Toji asked. "Politically, I mean."

Misato let out an exhausted laugh but said nothing.

“I don’t understand it at all,” Toji repeated.

It wasn’t people or Evangelions who’d dashed Europe’s hopes of seizing control of Nerv Japan’s facilities, the subterranean Chronostatic Sphere, and Hakone’s current stock of Evas. A separate and overwhelming force of nature had done it. The resolution that had given approval to the mission was abandoned. In the end, its only result was to further complicate an already messy situation.

“Commander, when you go to negotiate with the Europeans, I wanna—” Toji stopped to rephrase his request. “Please, take me with you.”

All humanity could do was keep seeking answers.

“I’ll be counting on your help, Deputy Commander.”

Chapter 8:
A Return to Moonlit Nights

THE IMMENSE SWARM of locusts not only stopped the European invasion but also inflicted severe damage across the northern half of Japan's main island. The ravenous bugs devastated plant life, both agricultural and natural, and paralyzed nearly all forms of transportation and infrastructure. With no visibility, cars couldn't move. In the places where power lines didn't get eaten through, the electrical substations suffered short-circuits, which in turn caused even more widespread damage. And still the swarm continued its reign of terror. Over the span of several days, the insects ate the countryside bare and rode the wind into the Pacific Ocean, where they crossed into a spot where the astronomic-scale concave mirror of the Longinus Curtain focused the sun's rays. Amid the rainbow colors of the many-layered aurora, the swarm burned away into dust. The locust cloud split into several towering cyclones, twirling higher and higher as they chased the light of their own burning.

As if marking the passing of this plague, the Longinus Mirror began to lose its reflectivity, and the moon returned.

Having burned a path across the Earth for several days, the mirror gradually disappeared, like a fading ripple, after having been disturbed by Asuka's and Cinq's Evangelions.

Once again, humanity looked up at the moon.

The unexplained disappearance of mass from the Earth's crust continued, and the planet was still constricting. Asia and the Indian subcontinent were moving north and sinking, and the ocean swelled around the islands of the western Pacific. The tidal surges struck as far as the southern shore of the Kanto region in Japan. Despite continued disasters on a global scale—or rather, *because* of them—many rejoiced at the return of the moon to its natural place in the sky.

At least the moon hasn't changed, the people thought.

Chapter 9:
From a Great Distance

RYOJI KAJI, Aida Kensuke, and their Nerv Japan intelligence team were far from home in Cyprus on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea.

The trail left by Seele had unexpectedly led them to this island.

The Human Instrumentality Project had failed. Even assuming that was a good thing, humanity needed to figure out the meaning behind Armaros' message and what the original purpose of the Project had been. To find those answers, Kaji and Kensuke were tracking the knowledge left behind by those visor-wearing old men. The Dead Sea Scrolls, once a reliable source of answers, had little to say after the Project's failure.

Kaji's team was investigating the basement of an old church in an abandoned village. All around them, the people of Cyprus were in conflict. Two factions, one in the north and another in the south, were contesting territory, and the UN's ceasefire line danced about —north, then south, and back again. The village had been occupied just a few days ago.

"So basically," said Kensuke, "this makes us looters, doesn't it?"

Amid Europe's turmoil, Kensuke had retrieved a lead, however tenuous, that Seele once had a base here—though the word the informant had used was "lair."

Lair, Kaji thought with a chuckle. *What, like some evil organization?*

The church had connections to the Order of Malta. By choosing this location, perhaps Seele had intended to hide themselves behind legends of a different secretive organization.

The church's cellar had been used for munitions storage by either the government or the rebels. Rusted ammunition had been

dumped in piles all over the space.

Investigating a wall hidden behind one such pile, Kensuke announced, “There’s an open chamber on the other side of this wall.”

“Whoa, whoa, hotshot,” Kaji said. “Did you stop to consider whether that ultrasonic scanner might set off some of this unexploded ordnance?”

Kensuke let out a cocky laugh. “Kaji-san, how can that be your attitude when we’re about to discover a holy relic—or at least, something that’s been secreted away as if it were one?”

The wall held a hidden doorway, which the pair managed to wrench open after some fiddling. They’d expected to find a pitch-dark space, but there must have been an opening somewhere in the stone ceiling, because a shaft of light fell upon a stone table in the center of the room.

And on the table, was… *Whoa, whoa.*

“That’s Kiel’s visor,” Kaji said, glancing about for any sign of a booby trap. “Whether or not this was their *lair* , Seele must have at least visited this place.”

Who had brought—or returned—the visor here? Whatever the case, it was a clue.

Kaji hummed in thought. “Well, let’s get to work.”

Five hours later, they hadn’t found anything else substantial. Having exhausted all other ideas, Kensuke was using his scanner on the visor, and Kaji was tapping along the walls.

“This visor looks like it has some kind of data terminal,” Kensuke said, “but it’s odd…”

“What’s odd?”

“There’s no data storage or communication devices…or even a power source. Just an output.”

Kaji turned up a palm. “You probably need to connect another device to it to get video or audio or whatever.”

“Without any kind of input or an antenna?”

“Maybe it uses induction or something…”

“Kaji-san, look!”

Kensuke pointed to the stone table, where the visor had begun to blur like it was an image on a screen. It was fading in a static-like pattern as if it might vanish from existence.

“Preposterous!” Kaji said. He took the visor in his hands. To his relief, he found that he could still touch it. But even in his hands, the visor continued to flicker.

The visor is disappearing, Kaji thought. *And before it does, there’s only one thing we can do…*

Kensuke reached the same conclusion. “Kaji-san, let me try it on.”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea. This thing isn’t normal.”

“I want to know *everything* !”

Kensuke’s eyes were serious. He had, after all, been the one who’d discovered this place.

What price did he pay to get this information? Kaji wondered.

Just before Kaji’s team had lost contact with Nerv Japan, they’d received word that a white German Eva-02 had appeared, with wings strikingly similar to the Allegorica’s.

There were no records of Nerv Japan ever sending a survey team to this area. However, before Nerv splintered apart, each branch had been in charge of actively investigating archeological sites with potential ties to relics. And Cyprus would have fallen under the European branch…

Kaji’s mind put the pieces together.

He made a trade with the Europeans.

He gave up the Allegorica’s technology in exchange for this visor.

He went too far.

Not being chosen to pilot an Eva must have come as quite a shock to the young Aida Kensuke. He’d discarded everything—his relationships, his family, his house, his friends—and devoted himself to the intelligence department, completing missions with astonishing vigor regardless of their legality.

Maybe putting him near me was a mistake, Kaji thought.

Kaji was no stranger to making extreme decisions. He never viewed himself through the lens of good or evil; he was merely moving game pieces. Is that what Kensuke had done?

I bet he's feeling that same sense of superiority, too.

Kaji felt as if he were watching his past self.

But what's the price, and how will it be paid?

"Hey—" Kensuke objected, as Kaji put on the visor.

Information flooded his mind—light, sound, and something unknown, beyond his five senses—overwriting what was already there.

What is this? What kind of technology is this?

The answer came immediately.

The visor held an arrangement of memories, carried on across the wheel of time, to prevent the wearer from making the same mistakes after everything started again from zero.

Too late, Kaji realized he'd made a terrible mistake, and yet… it didn't come entirely as a surprise.

"I guess this is where I say, 'poor me,'" Kaji said. They were the last words he spoke of his own accord.

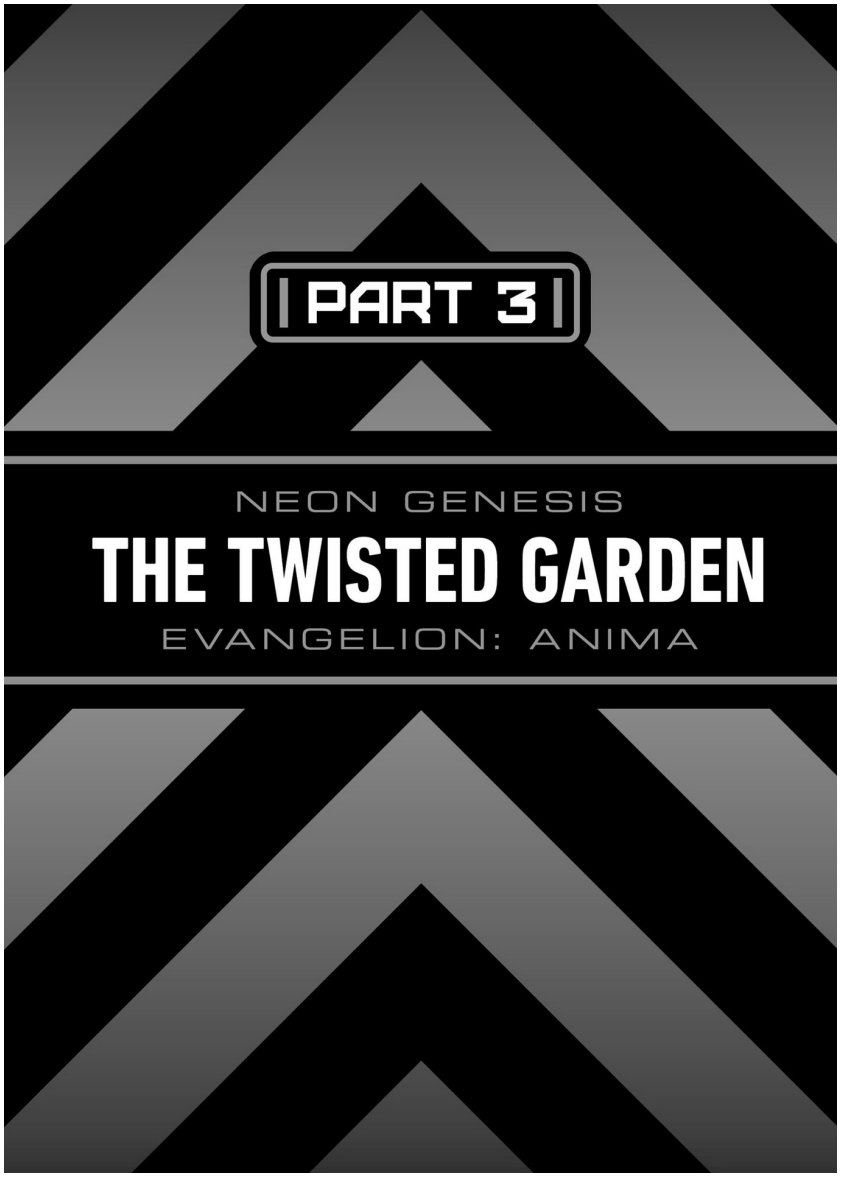
The accumulated knowledge of the Seele of the past—though, that wasn't what it had always been called—overwrote him. Or… was it mixing with him? *The past? What is the past?* He had many questions, but understood that the answers were all around him. He knew how Seele was passed along. At the very end, only that which was most important to him remained—his love, Misato. Then her image sank down and disappeared.

I'm sorry.

Seele was the steward of the Human Instrumentality Project.

But the Project had already been consigned to the next world, one that was yet to be born, and with nothing left but to wait for the end, Seele no longer had any purpose.

In this waning world, Kaji Ryoji became the new Seele.


PART 3
NEON GENESIS
THE TWISTED GARDEN
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 10:
The Flight to the Moon

BEFORE THE MOON returned to Earth's sky, only one person in all the world had crossed the Longinus Curtain and approached it.

But when she saw the Earth's pale companion, she gasped.

"What is that?"

To say the moon had changed wouldn't begin to describe the sight. The moon she saw before her didn't fit with any of her previously held knowledge.

First of all, the moon was clearly closer than it should have been. Second—

It looks like it's swollen to the point of bursting!

The moon's diameter had grown to over 1.2 times its previous size, its orbit dropping toward the Earth. And these changes were still in progress. Due to the constant changes to the moon's trajectory and the force of its gravity, Eva-02 Allegorica's AI had to continuously recalculate Asuka's entry.

"So large…" Asuka remarked to herself. "So near."

Countless fissures ran in ripple-like patterns across the moon's surface—this was especially easy to see on the dark side—revealing fire below. *Did something crash into the moon and create those burning fissures? Or were they made by something bursting up from below?* Part of the surface had even melted and swirled about in convection currents.

So unexpected and shocking was the sight that Asuka wondered if something was wrong with Unit Two's display. Her deep blue eyes tried to find the truth within the infinity focus. She even felt the impulse to go outside and look for herself.

The moon was supposed to be cold and geologically still, or so Asuka had been taught. Sure, some of the moon was thought to be warm, a residual effect of its original heat, and possibly the

repeated impacts of the asteroids and comets that had formed its seas. It contained a core, a mantle, and a crust, but no plate tectonics. The moon's topography remained unchanged across vast spans of time. Disturbances were generally limited to the expansion and contraction caused by the sun's heat, and the only moonquakes were tidal in origin, the Earth tugging at its satellite from its fixed position in the sky.

That was how it was *supposed* to be.

But now, everything Asuka knew had been upended. Her first instinctive reaction was to complain.

"C'mon, can't you give me a break?"

"If what I'm seeing is real," Asuka said to herself, "then surely they must be seeing this from Earth, too."

The moon's transformation was so extreme that anyone looking up would have noticed, even with the naked eye.

According to the Eva's measurement logs, the moon's cataclysmic change had begun immediately after Asuka burst through the Longinus Curtain. But now, still shaken by Ayanami Cinq's death, Asuka nevertheless tried to look at the information from every angle to find a better explanation. One answer came—rather than the moon suddenly undergoing this radical transformation, Asuka, having passed through the curtain, now saw what had been hidden.

"If we haven't been seeing the real moon from Earth, what *have* we been seeing?"

As outlandish as the thought seemed, there was data to back it up. Asuka had been attempting, unsuccessfully, to establish communication with Tokyo-3. In fact, she couldn't communicate with anyone on Earth. If this moon was being seen from Earth, that would mean that visible electromagnetic radiation was passing through the curtain from the moon's side to Earth, and she should have at least been able to piggyback some kind of transmission on those waves. But none of her attempts had gone through.

"Has the Longinus Curtain been showing us a lie?"

At least the radio silence didn't necessarily mean that the

Earth had been wiped out. That possibility had been among her fears. *Well,* she thought dryly, *I still have one thing to look forward to.*

Then she realized that if the Longinus Curtain *had* been hiding the truth, the people on Earth wouldn't have been able to observe Eva-02's successful passage across the barrier. To Shinji, in Nerv Japan, Asuka and Cinq would have *both* appeared to have been killed by the lance.

Has he given up on me? Or is he still betting on my survival? When I get home, I'll make sure to drag the answer out of him.

She imagined the scene.

"You jerk! You didn't believe in me? "

"No, Asuka! It's not like that!"

And then she'd make him look up at her and say everything she wanted to hear. It was going to be so satisfying.

Asuka knew that her lunar expedition had become a one-way trip. But that kind of thinking was liable to break her. Instead, she directed her thoughts on all the reasons she needed to make the return.

On her cockpit's display, an auxiliary window showed an image of the Earth, where her communication laser was locked on.

"That Earth is a lie."

Asuka had another reason to doubt what she saw on the curtain's surface, besides the communication blackout. For reasons she didn't understand, the Earth behind her appeared unnaturally darker than it had on the other side.

She knew that the people down on Earth would be coming up with plans of their own. So she, too, must do everything in her power. The moment she stopped moving forward would be the moment the impossible hopelessness of her situation broke her apart. Already she could practically hear herself snapping.

Focus on the job.

"So large…" she repeated. "So near."

She wondered how far from the Earth the moon was now.

Without a reliable reference point on her home planet, she couldn't make a particularly accurate measurement, but the planetary satellite seemed to have crossed its former perigee of 350,000 kilometers.

"I wonder if it'll hit," she said, meaning Earth. "I suppose I could ride the moon back down."

But if that happened, the world would certainly have reached its end.

Would the moon deliver that final, crushing blow?

Whatever was going on, she was witnessing something beyond the ordinary.

The moon… The moon is…

The moon felt violently alive, with hot blood flowing within it.

The moon is not dead.

Chapter 11:
Heartbeat

AT AN ALTITUDE of 300 kilometers above the moon's surface, Eva-02 Allegorica released a scouting satellite from its payload and then another a short time later. But the satellites didn't carry much fuel for orbital corrections—and, as if to illustrate this dilemma, Eva-02's AI recalculated its own orbit yet again. If their orbits kept on changing, Asuka wouldn't be able to rely on their reconnaissance for long.

Having launched the satellites, Eva-02 Allegorica began dropping into an even lower orbit.

THRUM!

Asuka felt her heart beating fast.

Hm? Am I nervous or something? That's not like me. I— She put her hand to her chest.

"Wait, that's not coming from me. Isn't that what Unit Two's chest sounds like?"

THRUM!

What's going on?

Talking to her Eva, she said, "You do realize you're not Super Eva, don't you? You don't have a heart in there!"

But the heartbeat kept pulsing. The feedback from her Eva was causing the inside of her own chest to feel warm.

Asuka grunted. "Why is this happening?"

The cause was far away from Asuka, beyond the possibility of her knowledge, back on Earth.

On the other side of the Longinus Curtain, two Evas were locked in battle. Euro-II had begun mimicking Super Eva's heartbeat in order to summon back the Q.R. Signum Shinji had torn away from it.

Never would Asuka have guessed that her Eva-02 was having

a twin resonance with another Eva of the same model.

A vision of Hikari accompanied the heartbeat. Asuka didn't know about Euro-II or that Hikari was its pilot. And she sensed—not necessarily for that reason—a different Hikari from the one Shinji saw, not one ruled by inescapable terror. Asuka's vision was the exact opposite; Hikari was smiling, childlike. But why?

BEEP!

An alarm brought Asuka out of her thoughts. Even before she read the warning's contents, she slapped the emergency startup button. The heartbeat had begun to negatively affect the Allegorica system's graviton floaters, and the gravitational field was being buffeted about.

Asuka clicked her tongue. She'd intended on gliding silently into hostile territory with her systems on standby. But the alarm was like a cell phone ringing in her pocket—whatever its message, it wouldn't be good news.

Lights flowed like blood through the status board, and the plug filled with LCL. The Eva shared its senses even more closely with Asuka, and the jolting heartbeat ratcheted up another notch.

"Agh, would you shut up?"

The N_2 reactor automatically spooled up its output to combat levels, and the control sticks lost their stiffness. Strength swelled through Unit-02's entire body, and the Eva was now operating at full power.

Eva-02 was still lowering its orbit toward an altitude of 200 kilometers.

Don't tell me it's Armaros already. Well, I guess that would save me the trouble of searching for him…

What appeared before Eva-02 was not Armaros but rather a zombie drawn to the heartbeat.

Asuka's telescopic cameras enlarged her view of the moon's horizon ahead where an Angel Carrier stood.

"What?!" Asuka shouted. "What are *you* doing up here?"

To the best of the engineering team's knowledge, the bodies of

the larva-bearing giants had once belonged to the white mass-production Evangelions. How had one of those gotten up on the moon, and also…why?

"I wonder if it's spotted me yet."

It's looking this way.

It's looking—

Her thoughts were interrupted as she was struck by a beam of light accompanied by trichromatic bands of color.

Immediately, Asuka lowered the left control stick, and the thrusters pushed the giant down.

The beam followed, and Asuka's consciousness began to grow distant. Then Eva-02 Allegorica quickly dropped altitude and found refuge on the far side of the moon's curvature.

The Allegorica system needed some time to build up its gravitational effects. When it had finished rearranging the gravitons between its artificial-diamond slits, the Eva used the gravity field to stabilize its altitude. Flying over the peaks and valleys, the scenery like a black-and-white silent movie, Asuka laughed with satisfaction.

So, finally, we meet again! Asuka's hair stood on end, her skin covered in goosebumps. Her face twisted into a ghoulish smile.

"Hallelujah!"

The moon's geography was far more jagged than she'd imagined it would be as it passed beneath her with incredible speed. She flew over the monotone landscape—patches of sunlight and black voids of shade—then over great rivers of flame. She had Eva-02 retrieve the Powered 8 railgun from its pylon. The giant gripped the gun in its right hand.

Asuka laughed. "Ah, I was hoping more than anything that *I'd* be the one to get you when you showed up!"

Asuka knew that beam-like mind attack. In that Carrier's cocoon was the Angel Arael.

"You humiliated me last time," Asuka said as she looked over

all the gauges and readouts on her display as if she were looking in the mirror one last time before a big date. She made sure she was still linked to the scouting satellites.

She locked the satellites on to the Angel Carrier—the Arael Carrier—for constant monitoring.

"But you're not so bad, after all. I mean, you brought yourself to me. And this time, I'm going to kill you!"

Ignoring the protests of the weapons control system, Asuka switched the Powered 8's output to the maximum setting. One feature of the railgun was the ability to finely adjust the rate of fire, but at this setting, the weapon wouldn't be able to unleash many shots. Once she'd spent the capacitors' stored-up energy, even her twin N_2 reactors would need some time to replenish. More than that, the friction and abrasion would severely wear the rifle's acceleration rails.

But in exchange for that cost, the Powered 8 could fire a single shell with kinetic energy an order of magnitude greater than the previous-gen pallet rifle could achieve.

According to analysis from Arael's attack three years ago, the Angel used an A.T. Field to penetrate its opponent's psyche. During the attack, the Angel's A.T. Field was no longer a wall, but rather a tunnel reaching out to pierce and neutralize its target's own A.T. Field.

That same kind of barrel-shaped field structure was also utilized by Eva-00 Type-F's long rifle, the Field Piercer, a.k.a. the Angel's Backbone. But in the brief moment of firing, the Eva-00 Type-F was vulnerable to a direct attack. Perhaps Arael would share that same weakness. Even better, Arael carried out its attack over a prolonged period of time. Of course, that meant that while Asuka was aiming her shot, she'd be exposing herself to the Angel's mental attack.

Asuka began altering Eva-02 Allegorica's flight path. Making a beeline for the Arael Carrier would have prevented her from using the moon's topography to her advantage. For the battle, her strategy would likely involve flanking her enemy as they traded shots through the gaps between the mountains. No matter how low

she flew, she was ultimately on an orbital path. She wouldn't be able to change course like an airplane in atmosphere. Outer space was irritating like that.

According to the map generated by her scouting satellite's sensors, her first opportunity to fire would come in thirty seconds.

Even before she emerged from the shadow of the mountain, the ridgeline became brightly lit. Arael was already targeting Asuka. *Is it because of the heartbeat?*

But then her moment came, and she squeezed the trigger.

"Eat 240 megajoules of pure destruction!"

The Powered 8's recoil sent Eva-02 Allegorica somersaulting backward, enveloped in Arael's light. But she'd aimed true.

I've got this.

The Carrier reached out its arm, and a powerful shield appeared. Just before Eva-02 passed behind the next mountain, Asuka saw her shot strike the shield, but rather than disintegrating from the tremendous transfer of energy, the Carrier's shield ionized the railgun shot and converted it into a circular, rainbow-colored shock wave that scattered the nearby regolith.

The attack didn't go through.

What?! The Carrier can generate its own shield even while Arael is performing its mental attack?

"That's cheating!"

KAFWOOM!

Suddenly, the N_2 reactors shut down, and the Eva switched to its internal power source. The operational limit timer began counting down.

"Hey! Come on!"

The Allegorica's control system had crashed after having to relentlessly recalculate its altitude control and graviton floater alignment. The N_2 reactors automatically performed an emergency shutdown. The phase-differential electric generators on the wingtips should still have been working, but the power transmission had

been shut down from the Allegorica unit.

Every part of Asuka's Eva from the waist down was frozen and unresponsive. She couldn't even disconnect from the Allegorica unit.

"Agh!" she shouted, hitting the console with her first.

The console refused to send the command to reboot the system.

"I shouldn't have expected anything better from a prototype!"

Letting out a stream of curses in multiple languages, Asuka released herself from the pilot's seat and floated in the LCL's current toward the rear of the entry plug.

"You're not some old computer, so stop acting like one!"

A breaker box for the Allegorica unit had been installed behind the pilot's seat next to the large logical definition drive. Asuka had no option but to reboot the system with a manual switch. But her Eva would soon be leaving the mountain's cover.

"I wish I hadn't told them to install this somewhere it wouldn't get in my way."

If Cinq were alive, she'd be able to see the battlefield from above and provide me cover with that gamma-ray laser. Asuka felt a loneliness too powerful for words. Just as she became aware that she was alone, a beam of light appeared on her display.

Arael's beam reminded her of the light that had appeared when Cinq was swallowed up by the Lance of Longinus.

That was when Asuka's consciousness was stolen away. Just a moment's weakness let the Angel in, and Arael's light penetrated deep into her being.

THRUM!

A strong jolt struck Asuka all over her body, and she reawakened with a grunt.

An impact to her head had left a burnt smell in her nose. Asuka looked around and saw that her hair had gotten sucked into the intake for the LCL circulation system at the rear of the plug, and the fluid had stopped flowing.

LCL had the same buoyancy as the human body—slightly lighter than water. The fluid wasn't easily compressible, and its flow carried considerable force. The sudden stoppage had sent a jolt through the entire system. One of three LCL circulation pumps had broken, and if Asuka hadn't been wearing waterproof earplugs, her eardrums would have ruptured, too.

Violently awakened by this jolt, her head throbbing, her face flushed even though no one was around to see, Asuka let out an ugly scream.

What the hell am I doing?

The Allegorica unit began its restart sequence. The Eva had gone off-kilter and was now descending. The giant had passed into a valley out of the Arael Carrier's line of sight, but with its systems impaired, Eva-02 would crash into the moon in less than forty seconds.

Keeping one eye on the startup indicator light, Asuka used the cutting edge of her multi-tool to slice off her hair. Though she took pride in her long locks, she didn't hesitate. Soon she was swimming to the front of the entry plug and back into her pilot's seat.

Asuka expected a lot from others, but even more from herself—and that included self-improvement. So what if she lost her hair? She still had plenty to be proud of.

If Asuka didn't get the LCL circulating again, she'd suffocate within minutes.

"But first, I have to deal with that monster!"

With bloodshot eyes, Asuka glared in the direction of the enemy hidden on the other side of the mountains and then began separating out the usable parts of the still-rebooting system.

First, the thrusters…

Chapter 12:
Counterattack

EVA-02 ALLEGORICA tumbled onto the moon's surface at five kilometers per second. If Asuka hadn't been in a liquid cockpit, and if the Eva hadn't had an A.T. Field, they both would have been badly damaged. The momentum threatened to rebound the Eva back into the sky, but Asuka engaged the thrusters to keep it in contact with the ground.

She felt the rear legs reengage under control of the main unit.

Within the restraint armor, the sound of the Eva's four feet planting on the ground came across as a muted, echoing rumble, but it was the first time Asuka had heard anything from the outside world in a long time.

"Now, run!"

Even though she'd been skimming across the ground, she'd maintained orbital speed and remained in a state of free fall without any sensation of gravity. At last, she felt the moon's gravitational pull.

Slowly, unsteadily, the Eva stood. Her equipment had mostly survived intact. The alignment of the Powered 8's barrel remained true. Her target was close; less than six kilometers separated them.

Asuka clicked her tongue. "I'll have to use the other one." She ejected the Powered 8's magazine, which had only been fired once, and then retrieved another magazine from the payload. This one was marked with an S.

"All right, Shinji. I'm counting on you."

As the approaching Eva-02 slowed, the Arael Carrier turned and began closing the distance.

Chapter 13:
The Lance's Logic

IT WAS EARLY MORNING in Nerv Japan's headquarters when two people happened to cross paths in the elevator lobby en route to the command center.

"Good morning, Commander Katsuragi."

"Ah, good morning, Deputy Commander. Another early start, Suzuhara-kun?"

"After we sent out Soryu—and Cinq—I've been calling out to them every morning," Toji replied.

"Did you finish reading the report from engineering?" Misato asked.

Toji nodded. "You mean the analysis of Euro-II's lance that Shinji brought back? They found a clump of salt in a sixteen-by-twenty-millimeter reliquary at the spearhead."

A reliquary was simply a container for housing something significant or sentimental.

The concept sounded unscientific—magical, even—but by placing an object of personal significance inside these containers, an Eva pilot could more easily manifest their A.T. Field on the weapon's cutting edge, which dramatically increased the effective strength and penetration of the weapon.

This phenomenon could largely be attributed to the placebo effect. The effect had been known to continue when the object was taken away without the pilot's knowledge, and to go away when the pilot feared the object was lost, whether or not it actually had been. Because their effects couldn't be reliably calculated, Maya disliked the use of reliquaries in the field. Nevertheless, after the Battle at Nerv HQ three years prior, nearly every Eva's weapons (aside from energy-based ones or ammunition shared between models) now contained reliquaries so that each pilot could take advantage of them as desired.

Embedded within the Powered 8 ammunition Asuka had brought to the lunar expedition were several of Shinji's hairs, which she'd forcefully insisted he cut and give to her. They'd both watched over the manufacturing process. That step, the watching, seemed to be important to the reliquaries' effectiveness, though the reasons were as yet unknown.

Toji said, "If the pilot of Euro-II really was…"

"Yes?" Misato prompted.

"Nothing."

Toji disembarked the elevator on the command center's control booth floor. But he thought, *If the pilot of Euro-II was Horaki-san, as you say, then someone close to her—family, even—might have been exposed to the Lance's light in Europe and turned into a pillar of salt.*

When Misato exited the elevator on the commander's deck one floor above, she was greeted by the cheerful, energetic sound of an electric guitar.

Taking the lead from a routine established by a previous spacefaring superpower, at precisely 7 a.m., Shinji had aimed an ultra-shortwave antenna in Tokyo-3 toward the moon and begun broadcasting music, whether or not anyone was listening on the other end.

He spoke into his headset. "This is Tokyo-3. Good morning, Asuka. Are you awake?"

After the question, he left a brief pause, and all voices in the command center fell silent. The morning song carried across every deck of the open room. Two seconds passed—enough time for the radio signal to make the 380,000-kilometer trip and return—then three, then four, then five…but no reply came.

Not letting himself lose hope, Shinji continued, "You must be awake. It's a sunny day here. Aoba-san chose your music this morning. I suggested 'What a Wonderful World,' but Toji said that was a bad idea because it would sound like it was going to be our last transmission or something. Oh, and I have some good news about Unit One."

On the upper deck, Misato mouthed *Super Eva* , but Shinji

ignored her.

From the deck below, Toji waved to get the commander's attention and transferred a separate transmission to her station that had come in through Hyuga's booth.

Shinji kept talking to Asuka, though no response came.

"It looks like we've found a way to get Unit One to fly. I said, why not launch me from Tanegashima like the 0.0 Evas, but judging from that whooping I took, I guess I don't do so hot without my feet on the ground, so everyone but me is saying that outer space is a complete no-go until I get the right equipment. And—"

Misato's voice cut in, drowning out Shinji.

"Kaji-kun… Ryoji! What happened to you?!"

Misato fell apart in full view of everyone.

Startled, Shinji turned to the commander's station. "What's happening?"

Toji intercepted the video feed and redirected it to the main display. It was a low-resolution video from Cyprus. Kaji's expression was completely lifeless.

In shock, Toji called out, "Kensuke, what's wrong?!"

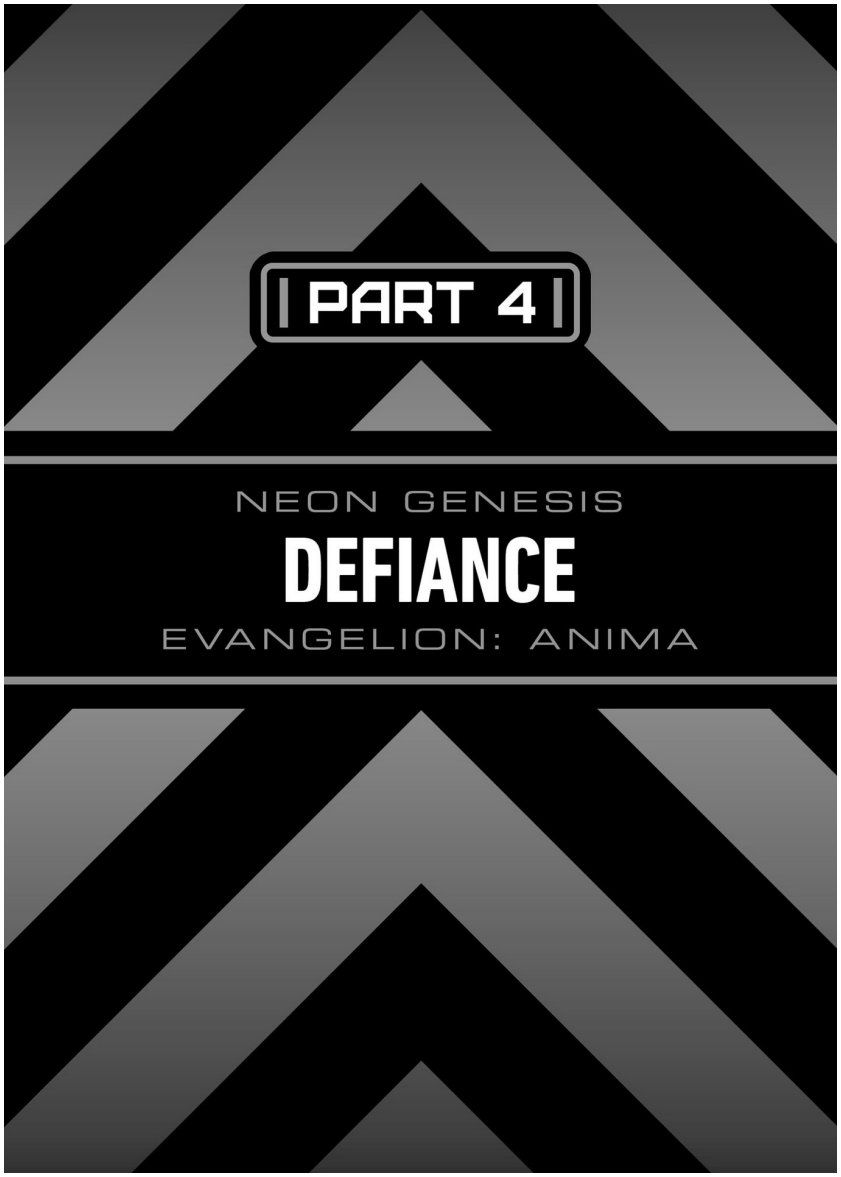
Kensuke's voice came over Toji's headset.

< < It's like I said, we found a Seele relic, and it's turned Kaji-san into a completely different person! He's saying he's Seele, like Kiel, but he's *Kaji-san* . I don't know if he's putting on an act or what, but… Look, I tried to ask Commander Katsuragi. You get her to listen, man. I'm not handing Kaji-san over to *nobody* . We need an emergency evac! > >

"Hold on," Toji said. "You've got to give us more than that."

< < It's not something I can talk about over the air. But I'll tell you one thing—he says he's inherited the memories of past worlds. Don't ask me what 'past worlds' are. His role is to make the right adjustments to progress the Human Instrumentality Project and to make sure the same mistakes aren't repeated. He doesn't seem to know how many of him there have been, but get this—the

first Seele's name? It was *Noah* . > >


PART 4
NEON GENESIS
DEFIANCE
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 14:
Asuka's Battle

STRANDED ON THE MOON, Asuka and Eva-02 Allegorica faced an Angel Carrier bearing Arael's larva in its abdomen. Asuka's first attack had failed, and a system error had forced her to make an emergency landing. Now her entry plug's LCL circulators were malfunctioning, and her enemy was closing in.

Using the mountains for cover, Asuka attempted to circle behind her adversary, but whichever direction she went, the Arael Carrier immediately turned to face her.

It can see me, she thought, then, *No, not see me. But it can* feel *me. It can sense this heartbeat.*

THRUM, THRUM went the beat inside Eva-02's chest.

Asuka didn't know why the heartbeat had started during her low-orbit flyover of the moon, nor could she have known. The cause was back on Earth, on the other side of the Longinus Curtain, which blocked all communications, presenting only lies.

She didn't know that Nerv Germany had built an Evangelion—a twin, of a sort, to Eva-02—that was leading an invasion through Hokkaido and had begun to mimic Super Eva's heartbeat. Across the vast distance, Asuka's Eva-02 resonated with its twin, making the same pulsing sound. The gravitational disturbance spread to the floater slits in the Allegorica wings, where the gravitons amplified the signal.

Asuka understood one thing, however—the heartbeat within her Eva's chest was calling the Carrier to her.

"If that's how you're going to be…" Asuka said. *Then I'm going to lay a trap.*

She retrieved an N_2 bomb from the Allegorica's cargo compartment. In secret, Shinji and Toji had (illegally) replaced the explosive's control program so that the fuse could be activated with

a single confirmation code, just in case Asuka needed to use the weapon on her own. Asuka checked her Eva's fire control systems and confirmed that the N_2 was ready for activation.

"At least something has decided to work right," Asuka said as she buried the bomb in the ground.

If she couldn't escape the Arael Carrier, then she would guide it where she wanted. She backed away, putting the N_2 explosive directly between her and her pursuer.

Asuka needed to draw the Arael Carrier directly over the center of the explosion. The moon had no atmosphere, and without any air to act as a medium, the fast-moving shock wave of the nuclear blast wouldn't occur. (Technically, the moon had a trace atmosphere, long considered to be made up of gases emitted from underground. Eva-02 Allegorica's sensors had confirmed its presence. But the air was too thin even for a meteor to ignite upon entry, and certainly not of sufficient density to suit Asuka's purpose.)

But even though the lack of air would severely limit the bomb's radius, the temperature at ground zero would be well over one million degrees Celsius. Not even ash would be left behind.

Asuka waved her hands to stir up the LCL, which had gone still when the circulators broke down.

Asuka was reminded of how little Six had to have a small fan installed in front of her pilot's seat because her diminished lung capacity and weak respiratory muscles meant she had trouble breathing through the LCL. Asuka used to think that was funny; now she wished she had a fan like that for herself.

Roughly five minutes had passed since the LCL had stopped circulating. Plenty of oxygen remained in the entry plug, but without anything moving the fluid around, Asuka was breathing only the limited volume of LCL near her face. Her breaths were already becoming labored.

"Now, the Arael Carrier should be—"

There . The Angel's mental attack beam grazed Eva-02 Allegorica standing on the ridgeline, and Asuka hurriedly slid down

the slope and back into cover.

"Good boy."

The Carrier was coming, just as she'd predicted.

Eyes ahead, she felt around with her left hand for a panel on the side of her seat, opened it, took out the emergency pressure regulator, and put it in her mouth. The regulator forced oxygen-rich LCL from a reserve tank directly into her lungs. All she had to do now was wait.

The Carrier held its hand forward, appearing to focus its shield toward her. Could she catch her enemy by surprise?

"Now!"

A sphere of light sprang to life on the moon, as if the sun had landed on its surface.

A two-kilometer-wide crater of lunar soil and rock blasted into the air. The shock wave traveled through the ground and violently shook Eva-02 Allegorica. Asuka had caught the Arael Carrier directly in the center of the blast, where the N_2 reaction produced a burst of heat on par with the sun's core. There was no chance the Carrier would escape unharmed.

"Let's see if you survived that one."

Asuka had battled enough Angels to know she couldn't assume the fight was over. But when severely wounded, the Angels tended to focus on regenerating themselves. That could mean a chance for Asuka to regain the initiative.

Grounded by the moon's surface, Eva-02 Allegorica's sensors were protected from the electromagnetic forces of the N_2 explosion, while physical shutters protected the sensors from the intense light. Effectively, the Eva's eyes were closed, but its laser receivers continued to communicate with the scouting satellites, which dutifully reported the results of the attack. Eva-02's AI analyzed the data and presented it to Asuka.

"What?" she said in disbelief. "The explosion ejected an object half the size of an Eva so fast it was going to escape the moon's gravity, except that, 4.6 seconds after the blast, the object changed trajectory on its own—method unknown—and is now descending to the north of ground zero. The predicated landing position is…"

Asuka engaged the thrusters to leap backward.

“Here!”

She lifted off just moments before the Arael Carrier came diving in, instantly dispersing the plume of lunar dust Eva-02’s thrusters had kicked up.

“Didn’t the bomb do anything at all?!”

Then she noticed that the Carrier’s lower half was gone.

Though the blast had eradicated half its body, the Carrier had managed to use its powerful shield to protect its upper half. The two Q.R. Signum scales remained intact. But Arael’s larva didn’t launch its song-filled light. The Angel appeared to have been at least partially disabled, if not killed outright. It had taken a moment for Asuka to realize that her attack had done anything at all; the Carrier wasn’t moving like something that had lost half its body.

After the N_2 bomb sent the Arael Carrier hurtling toward outer space, it had manipulated its power shield to alter its course, much like the Allegorica unit made use of its floating field.

The Carrier landed on its two arms.

“You’re a nimble one, I’ll give you that.”

The surrounding area darkened. Having been blasted sky high by the N_2 explosion, the regolith dispersed evenly through the silence like an umbrella, blocking the sun.

Rather than retreating and allowing its damaged parts to regenerate, the Carrier was fighting to kill.

It came bounding toward Asuka on its arms. It was a trickier target to aim for now than when it had all its limbs.

“How are you so fast?!”

The Carrier moved with ease, unburdened by extraneous weight. Asuka lowered the acceleration of her Powered 8 and switched the rifle to fully automatic suppression fire mode. But when she fired, the Carrier didn’t even need to use its shield. It dodged her bullets as it crossed the distance to her.

Asuka felt personally offended, as if the Arael Carrier was making a statement about the imperfection of the human form, and

she sprayed her rifle to prove it wrong.

The railgun's rounds transferred from the magazine onto the rail in batches of twelve. The process took about half a second. The Powered 8 was notable for its ability to fire all twelve rounds nearly simultaneously, effectively saturating a single target with one shot, but that same mechanism resulted in a periodic delay during automatic fire. Right now, those half-second pauses were a major source of frustration.

The Arael Carrier circled around to Eva-02 Allegorica's left, then dug one hand into the ground and planted itself in place. Asuka swung the 8's line of fire in from the other direction, but before she could bring the rifle around, the Carrier produced its power shield on its free hand and lunged at her. Asuka tried to dodge the punch, but the Allegorica unit's uneven weight distribution and massive bulk hindered the Eva-02 from making quick movements. She couldn't quite get clear—

"Aggh!"

The impact knocked Eva-02 onto its side. The pressure regulator flew out of Asuka's mouth, leaving a gash on her lip—even though the mouthpiece was made of soft resin.

Where's the 8?! Shit, I dropped it!

I'll use the Magorox—no, wait, that will swing too slowly. Maybe I should use the Counter Sword instead…

The Carrier slapped the ground with both arms and leaped toward Asuka.

The heartbeat in her Eva's chest seemed to beat with even more intensity than before.

Still on the ground, Asuka was drawing the SRL-Magorox (short for "Magoroku Exterminator Sword") from her left wing's pylon when the Arael Carrier descended and grabbed her arm.

KACRACK!

From her left side came the tremendous sounds of breaking bone and metal.

Asuka screamed. *It broke my arm!*

Having stomped on Eva-02's arm with its foot— *no, its hand* — the Carrier then formed a fist and began pounding on the Eva's chest. The monster was trying to steal the heart it believed was inside.

Asuka coughed. She'd already disconnected the sensory feedback signals from the affected areas, but the pain lingered in her body and her mind. She began to panic.

WHAM! WHAM!

The impact of each punch rippled through the LCL.

"Why is this happening?! Someone tell me what's going on! My Eva doesn't have a heart!"

The heart was in Eva-01's chest, put there when it and Shinji were reborn.

The vessel wasn't a real, blood-pumping heart. Eva-01's S ^{2} Engine had run out of control and undergone a transformation beyond human understanding. The engine had opened a hole into dimensional space and drawn in tremendous power.

Miraculously, they'd managed to stem the raging torrent of energy with technology, and the energy had become a pulse contained within Super Eva's chest.

This…this is Super Eva's heartbeat… Shinji's heartbeat.

WHAM! WHAM!

Amid the thundering roar and shuddering impacts of the Carrier's blows, Asuka's dimming consciousness made the connection between her memories and what she was experiencing.

Her bloody lips parted, and she spat out, "This heartbeat belongs to Shinji! It's the sound of his life and his alone! I'll never let a monster like you take it!"

If she'd stopped to think about it, Asuka wouldn't have known exactly why she'd said those words.

Asuka's Eva-02 was simply resonating the Euro-II's pulse, which itself was a crude copy. On the surface, what Asuka had said didn't fit the circumstances, but deep down, she'd realized that even if the heartbeat was a copy, it was still from Super Eva—it represented a connection to Shinji.

Even with half its body gone, the Arael Carrier was too heavy for Eva-02 to push away. And it didn't recoil after its punches; the monster seemed to be using a kind of sideways-facing force field to drive its fist. But somehow, Eva-02 Allegorica found the strength—just barely—to resist.

"How am I supposed to move in this getup?!"

She needed to twist her Eva free from the Carrier, but the gigantic external unit was in the way. She set to work disconnecting the Allegorica unit, forgoing safety procedures in the name of speed. The entry plug's illumination turned red again as the timer for the Eva's internal power reserve began racing toward zero.

"Come at me!"

The disconnected Allegorica unit rose on its legs beside Eva-02, which was still pinned down and being pummeled by the Arael Carrier.

But as soon as the Allegorica was standing, it lost its balance and staggered back several steps before catching itself, stopping on hind legs built with the same artificial muscles found on the highly capable first-gen Jet Alone robot. The sight was surreal, and frankly comical. Asuka had left the Allegorica powered on but hadn't taken the time to dictate any behavior, such as retreating or firing missiles or making a remote attack. So, having found its balance, the Allegorica unit stood as still as a statue amid the scattering regolith.

And then something strange happened.

The source of the heartbeat—the waves in space—shifted outside of Eva-02.

The pulse now emanated from a point in the not-air between Eva-02 and the Allegorica unit, which was still generating its graviton field. Nerv Germany's Euro-II was using the same technology as the Allegorica to form its graviton-wave mirror, bending gravity and creating the heartbeat in a place of its choosing. But here, Eva-02 had separated from the Allegorica wings, and the focal point had shifted.

The Arael Carrier's fist froze.

Asuka looked up. The Carrier was staring at a point within the

scattering regolith. There, in the void, the heartbeat kept pulsing, and when the next beat came, a giant humanoid figure appeared.

Or rather, the moon dust and rocks appeared to take the shape of a giant figure. Each time the heartbeat pulsed and the fabric of space rumbled, the sediment danced, like corn on a hot skillet. The intermittent image, like that of a flickering projector, resembled a person the size of an Eva.

The Arael Carrier turned to the illusion and rushed toward it, seeking to snatch the heart from the dust.

Eva-02 was still in striking range, and not only that, *inside* the Carrier's shield.

Asuka wasn't going to let this one-in-a-million opportunity slip by. As she reacted, she said something she'd often said around Shinji.

"When you're with me, don't look away!"

Clutching the Magorox in her left hand, she braced her grip with her right hand and slashed upward at an angle.

Because her target was already missing half its body, nothing stood between her sweeping blade and the Q.R. Signum on the Carrier's right shoulder. The SRL Magorox dug into the black scale—the lifeline and power source for the giant—and the sword bisected the Signum like a bundle of straw.

The force of the impact sent the Carrier twisting into the low-gravity sky. The giant reached out its hand to produce a shield again, but Asuka—Eva-02—had already scooped up the Powered 8 from the dusty ground.

"Take this!"

The Carrier's remaining Q.R. Signum shattered in the fierce, rainbow-colored light.

But Asuka wasn't finished firing. Having lost its power source, the Angel Arael was dead before it could be reborn. The larva was already turning the color of ash—but the 8's powerful blast of kinetic energy shattered it like glass.

"Go away, you monster! Don't mess with the living!"

By the time the Carrier fell back to the surface of the moon, it had completely reverted to a corpse.

Chapter 15:
Pulse

ASUKA RECONNECTED EVA-02 to the Allegorica system. Once the power supply was operational, she drained the LCL from the entry plug. In the low gravity, she used a pulmonary suction device to expel the fluid from her lungs. Her throat made a grating, whistling sound, and the plug's vital sensors detected she was hyperventilating. The climate conditioner automatically regulated the concentration of oxygen in the air, and after a little time, her breathing relaxed.

The Q.R. Signums had vanished without a trace.

There were reports that when an Angel Carrier and its larva died, the remains disappeared after a short time. Though Asuka didn't want to face it, the possibility that these enemies might be recycled indefinitely crossed her mind.

"Maybe I should incinerate them with another N_2 bomb just to be sure."

What was that human figure the pulse formed in the dust?

The heartbeat had gone away without Asuka realizing at first. When she noticed that the deep rumble had been replaced by total silence, it was like it had never been there at all. Her Eva's sensors picked up a faraway underground tremor, but nothing strong enough for her to feel herself. Asuka was alone again. But back in this noiseless space, she realized something.

Deep in her chest, she could hear her own heart beating—*THUMP, THUMP* —announcing its presence like a lighthouse in the night. *I'm here. I'm here.*

For the first time, she thought of her heartbeat as more than a mere mechanism for circulating blood. A heartbeat was a primal and basic rhythm sent to the self and to the outside.

It was Super Eva's heartbeat, after all, that had drawn out the powerful Armaros.

Casually, as if the heartbeat had led someone else into a battle to the death against a mind-invading Angel and its zombified host, Asuka remarked, “I’m sure that heartbeat came from Super Eva.”

But despite her calm demeanor, she was tired—exhausted, really. Asuka’s half-awake state allowed her thoughts to tumble freely, untethered by rationality.

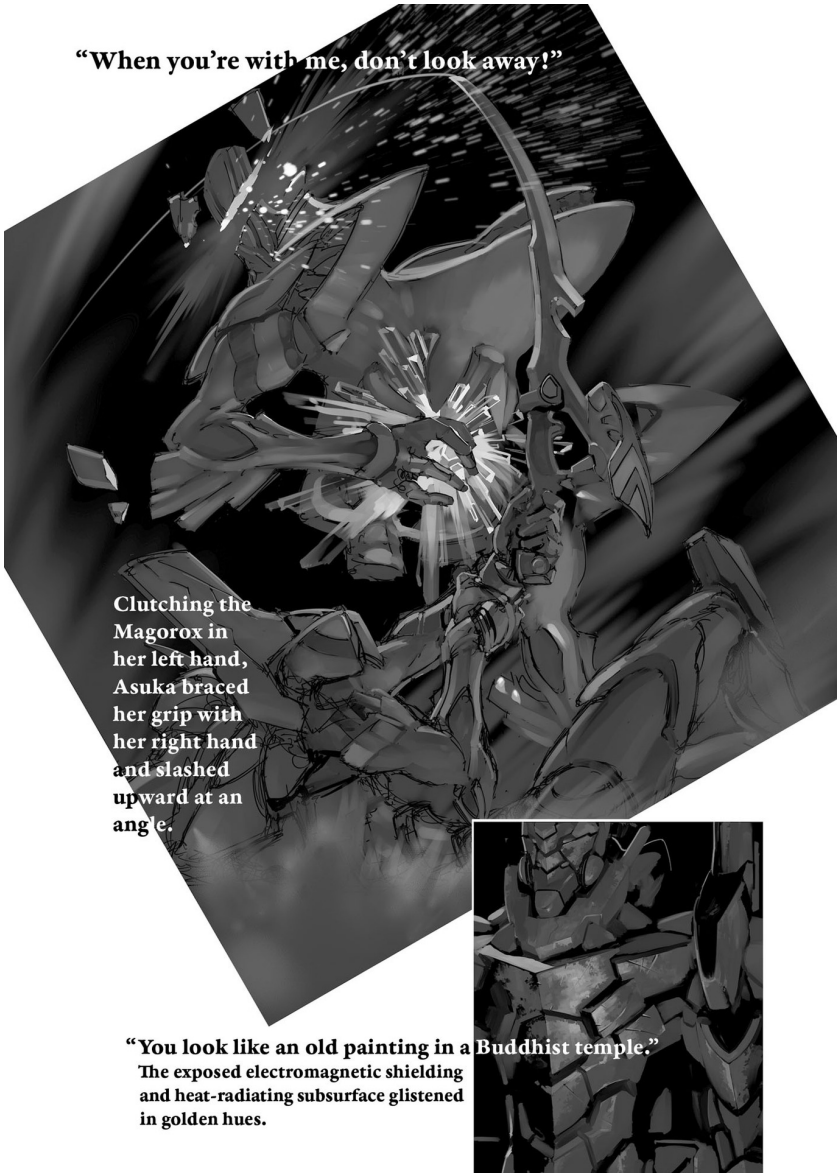
Was that pulse Shinji and Super Eva asserting their existence?

Could that distinctive rhythm have produced its performer’s image?

But just as she began to drift off, she roused herself and renewed her grip on the control stick.

“No sleep yet. I need to deal with the Carrier’s corpse first.”

Its left arm still dangling limply, Eva-02 Allegorica slowly went back into motion.


"When you're with me, don't look away!"
Clutching the Magorox in her left hand, Asuka braced her grip with her right hand and slashed upward at an angle.
"You look like an old painting in a Buddhist temple."
The exposed electromagnetic shielding and heat-radiating subsurface glistened in golden hues.

Chapter 16:
Toji's Battle

AT A STRATEGY MEETING in Nerv Japan, the assembled staff decided that the mission to rescue Kaji would proceed unofficially. Acting openly would gather too much unwanted attention.

The great global calamity continued apace; pulled in by the subduction of the Indian plate, the Arabian Peninsula had begun rotating counter-clockwise. When Commander Katsuragi collapsed, the decision was made to use an aid mission to the peninsula as a cover for the rescue operation.

To himself, Toji remarked, "Sure, right after you tell me not to leave, you go out of commission."

The next steps fell to Toji. He had to carry out his duty; time was pressing. He sent out Kaji's rescue team, assigned Maya and her staff to develop Super Eva's flying unit, and requisitioned several UN heavy VTOL planes—stripped of weapons and ammunition, and laden with food supplies—and flew north.

Sporadic skirmishes were breaking out across the mountains of northern Honshu. Finally asserting their sovereignty, the JSSDF were on the hunt for the abandoned and isolated remnants of the European airborne troops, who had taken to hiding in the backcountry.

Toji convinced the JSSDF to withdraw, and he took a few people to doggedly search the mountains for survivors. Whenever they found any, they notified the soldiers' home countries and took them into safe custody. On the surface, he was performing humanitarian work in accordance with international law, but Toji understood that his actions could be used as leverage for the coming negotiations with the Eurozone.

By going in person, he was also able to learn more about the attackers. Apparently, their invasion had been patterned after the Crusades, and Toji saw several soldiers wearing protective charms made with salt.

Toji's squad came under fire a few times, but the far greater threat was the frequent earthquakes.

The plague of locusts had eaten the mountains bare, and though a significant portion of the trees' root networks had survived, the ground dried out faster than Toji had expected. Every tremor could easily have caused a secondary landslide.

Some soldiers refused to come with him; for them, he left several VTOL planes on the barren mountaintops along with this message:

"Get to Hokkaido on your own. You can make it that far. Go to the assembly point and wait for the JSSDF to send a rescue team. Previously evacuated European troops are also gathering there."

At the end, he let some emotion—and his western Japanese accent—into his speech. "You're not gonna let yourselves die in a place like this!"

With each soldier he rescued, Toji felt like he was one step closer to the Euro-II's pilot—to Hikari.

Chapter 17:
Ayanami Rei Cinq

"CINQ'S *GHOST* IS HERE?" Shinji asked, his expression incredulous and unamused.

Aoba held up both hands with a placating shrug. "Look, I wouldn't be saying this if multiple people hadn't told me they were sure they saw her."

Shinji had come across Aoba in the break room—he'd been feeling a little light-headed after a pattern-fixing session intended to optimize his ability to command Super Eva and reduce the gap between his senses and the Eva's actions—and their conversation quickly took a turn for the strange.

"They probably saw Trois in some bad lighting and were mistaken," Shinji replied.

"Maybe, but Trois…"

Ayanami Trois had become mentally unstable after Ayanami Cinq was impaled and killed by the Lance of Longinus between Earth and the moon, so much so that Maya had refused to deploy her when the European forces invaded. The girl had been

cloistered in her private quarters for the past several days, and the medical staff had temporarily suspended her pilot sessions.

Shinji was about to press the button on the intercom to Ayanami's room, but then he hesitated, took out his communicator, and announced his visit to the supervisor's station first.

"Maya-san," he said, "I'm going in."

< < All right, but just be aware, all conversations in that room are being recorded, and her vital signs are being sent by telemetry. I'm sure you understand. > >

Shinji pushed the button. He needed to see Trois for himself.

"It's Ikari."

"Come in," came Trois' reply, without emotion. The door

opened.

This was Ayanami Trois' room, although the space had been so filled with all sorts of clothes on hangers that it seemed more like a walk-in closet. Shinji couldn't even see Trois through all the garments.

Shinji took a few steps inside and then zigzagged between the rows of clothes toward the back of the room where a liquid crystal wall glowed.

As he navigated the maze of racks, Shinji thought, *There's even more than the last time I was here.*

All the clothing belonged to Ayanami, but there wasn't one article of her own choosing. Some she'd purchased herself, but only on someone else's suggestion. The majority were presents. For reasons Shinji didn't altogether understand, after Asuka had bought Trois that first black dress—the one Quatre had absconded with—purchasing clothes for the fashion-indifferent pilot had become something of a pastime among the staff of Nerv Japan. The rows and rows of clothes racks were the end result.

Unfortunately, the clothes hadn't resulted in some dramatic change in the girl's life.

Her living quarters weren't as depressingly barren as before, but the room still lacked any sort of lived-in atmosphere; it felt like a storage room full of clothing.

Trois wore whatever she was given, but none of the gifts, nor their givers, had filled the gap Gendo had left behind.

As a joke, Shinji once supposed that Trois might be a dress-up doll living in her wardrobe, waiting for her next owner to come.

Man, Misato-san really got pissed at me for that.

Asuka had goaded Shinji into giving Trois an outfit only once—and that time, something different had happened. Up until that point, Trois had accepted every piece of clothing given to her, but when she unfolded the clothes Shinji offered her, she gave them right back.

Being here reminded Shinji of those idle days and how trivial his concerns had been.

Seriously though, what's with how expensive girls' clothing is?

Several outfits had been laid out on top of Ayanami's bed.

Finally making it past all the clothes racks, Shinji said, "Picking one out?"

"Yes," Trois replied. She was wrapped in a single bedsheet.

As Ayanami Trois turned to Shinji, the white glow of the liquid crystal wall provided a high-contrast and continuously shifting view of her graceful outline. The afterimage lingered in Shinji's gaze, even though he hadn't meant to see.

"Oh! Sorry," Shinji said, hurriedly ducking behind the nearest rack and turning away from the backlit girl.

"Which one do you like, Ikari-kun?"

"C-come on, you've got to ask me that *after* you put it on!"

The light filtering through the hanging clothes flickered, which Shinji took as a sign that Ayanami was getting dressed. He heard fabric swishing. The sound was coming closer.

Beep!

Super Eva's monitor sounded a warning in Shinji's pocket. The Eva had responded to Shinji's agitated state and moved unbidden. It was only then that Shinji realized he was, in fact, agitated, and he finally noticed that Trois wasn't acting like herself.

"I don't know," Ayanami said. "They all feel a bit small on me."

"Huh?" Shinji said as Ayanami placed her forehead on his back. When the surprise faded, he realized she was trembling.

"I'm sorry, Ikari-kun," she said. "I'm sorry. I sent Soryu to the other side of the barrier all by herself."

< < Shinji-kun?! > > It was Maya, checking in from the cage. < < Super Eva is moving. > >

"Maya-san, can you come to Ayanami's room? Quickly."

Chapter 18:
Two Souls

"SHE'S TROIS," Maya said.

"Are you sure?" asked Shinji. "But she…"

"The ID chip implanted in her arm confirms it, and so does the sync signal in her brain. And just to clinch it, so does her genetic tag."

Maya and Shinji had taken Ayanami to the tuning room, which held specialized medical equipment for maintaining the Ayanamis' unique physical and mental conditions. The girl in question was wearing a white gown on the other side of a glass window, where she'd been hooked up to a body scanner.

Despite all the evidence, Shinji was still unconvinced, but he didn't say anything.

"She's not Cinq," Maya said. "She's Trois… Physically, that is."

Until not long ago, there had been four Ayanamis. Three Unit-0.0 Evas had been placed in orbit as part of an anti-Angel search-and-destroy network established after the Battle at Nerv HQ. The foundation of that system was the mental mirror link shared between the four clones.

On Earth remained the one bearing a soul, Ayanami Trois, while the three soulless ones—Quatre, Cinq, and Six—piloted the three orbital Evas. But as the four acclimated to their coexistence, the soul seemed, to a certain extent, to be shared among them.

In order to keep their consciousnesses from becoming jumbled together, the three in orbit were left in a half-asleep state. Then Armaros had embedded its Q.R. Signum into Ayanami Quatre, and she'd either formed or was bestowed a self-identity that compelled her to go fugitive. The spark of self-awareness, formerly only present in one Ayanami at a time, now manifested itself in each Ayanami, and their mental link was disrupted.

Then, on a voyage to the moon, one Ayanami—Cinq—died.

“Their link is faint and intermittent,” Maya explained, “but Cinq’s death hit Trois the hardest. She’s the primary, after all.”

Shinji nodded in understanding, and Maya continued.

“After Quatre asserted herself as her own person, what happened to Cinq and Six? They formed their own identities. So, tell me, Shinji-kun, what of the soul’s original bearer, Trois?”

Shinji thought for a moment and then said, “She…didn’t seem to change much.”

“Didn’t, or *couldn’t* ? How do you think she must have felt, seeing other versions of herself blossoming around her and coming into their own?”

“How do I think she felt?” Shinji repeated, hoping Maya would fill in the answer for him.

She didn’t, or at least, she wasn’t going to right away. “Think about it,” she said.

Whatever the answer was, simply hearing her say it wouldn’t unlock any understanding; not until he’d truly contemplated it himself.

After a little while, he offered, “Could she have thought herself worthless? And that Cinq wasn’t the one who should have died? Did she overwrite herself with Cinq?”

“I’d give that answer fifty out of a hundred.”

“But how could that alter her physical height? It doesn’t make sense, right?”

“It’s not impossible. Psychological trauma can result in real and immediate physical symptoms. But I’d expect a sudden growth like that, and its reversion, to come with considerable pain.”

Ayanami’s height wasn’t what concerned Shinji the most right now.

Sensing his impatience, Maya continued. “The boundary that separates the girls’ consciousnesses is fairly weak. Rather than a deliberate transfer of her personality, this could be more like a multiple-car pile-up as a result of the sudden shock. Or maybe Trois became so critical of herself, she made herself *believe* that she became Cinq. I think the most likely scenario is that it’s a

temporary delusion. But…"

"But what?"

"She could become either one. Those girls aren't just twins—or quadruplets. Every Ayanami *is* her."

I should have talked with Trois more, Shinji thought.

He felt suddenly overcome with regret. Hadn't Toji and Quatre told him?

When he'd learned three years ago that Ayanami was a clone of his mother, he hadn't known how to face her. In all other contexts, everyone said that he'd become a lot more positive and sociable than he'd been as a younger teen. But when it came to Ayanami Rei, he didn't know how to relate to her.

I'm so much worse than all those people who tried to get her attention by buying her clothes.

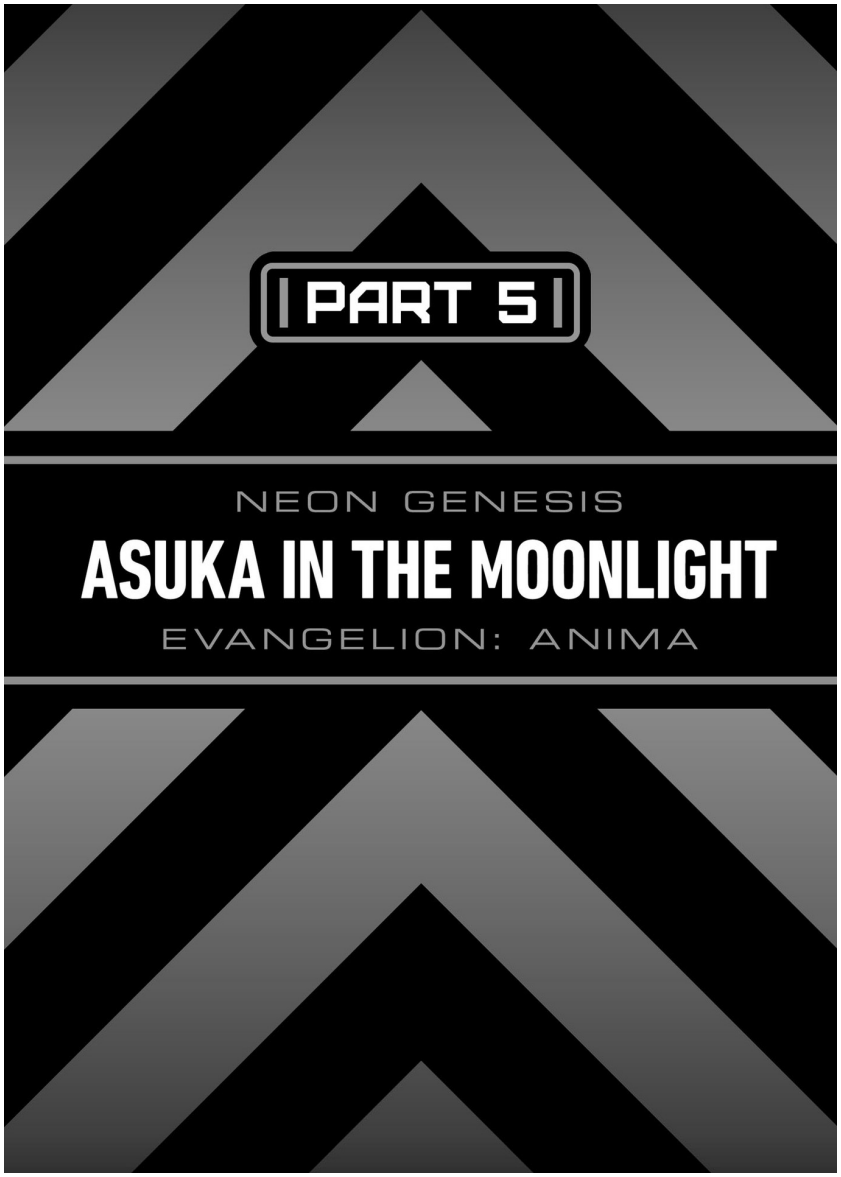
When Shinji tried, he'd picked out a simple dress like one his mother had once worn, faint in his memory. Trois rarely showed any emotion in her expressions, but that time, she'd become visibly upset.

Have I really been seeing her for who she is?

"We can't just tell her to get out of there," Maya said. "After all, Cinq is Rei, too. And because Trois is such a subdued girl, she might still be in there, only not coming to the surface. Let's just keep an eye on her."

In other words, it was up to Rei.

That same day, in several locations at the bottom of the sea around Oceania, the boundary between the tectonic plates burst open and released a terrific volume of sulfides. With all the other plates pushing underneath the Eurasian Plate, the opposite boundaries were stretching, weakening, and tearing apart. Earth's inner mass continued disappearing without pause.


PART 5
NEON GENESIS
ASUKA IN THE MOONLIGHT
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 19:
Asuka in the Moonlight

"GAH, YOU LOOK RIDICULOUS," Asuka remarked as she examined Eva-02 Allegorica's battle-damaged exterior through the gun camera. "You look like an old painting in a Buddhist temple."

The Eva's camouflage coating had chipped away in various places across its frame, particularly where it had been scraped and battered by the Arael Carrier. The exposed electromagnetic-shielding and heat-radiating subsurface glistened in golden hues.

But despite the severe and prolonged pummeling to the Eva's chest, its outer armor had held up surprisingly well.

The Eva's broken left arm wouldn't mend like that of a human body, but Evas had been known to spontaneously regenerate in times of danger and strong synchronization with their pilots. It was possible, at least.

Of the three LCL circulation pumps that had shut down when Asuka's hair blocked the intake, one was broken beyond repair, but the other two appeared capable of functioning well enough to get by. The Allegorica unit seemed to be behaving

itself now, and Asuka had expended roughly thirty percent of her ammunition. Her Eva wasn't in perfect shape by any means, but considering the tough battle it had just fought, the giant was in respectable condition. Still, Asuka would have to be more careful going forward. In her isolated and unassisted state, survival had become her greatest priority.

Her oxygen, water, and food supplies were adequate for now, but at her current rate of expenditure, they wouldn't last a month. The Allegorica unit was designed for unlimited flight, and with the entry plug's emergency life-support programs, she could lower her metabolism and enter a state of hibernation to extend her survival for several months.

As a risky, absolute last resort, she could purposefully over-synchronize with—and melt into—her Eva, and they could enter stasis together, like a fossil carried along by the passage of time.

Maya had explained the process to Asuka and Ayanami Cinq before they went on their lunar voyage, but the scientist had also stressed that it wasn't guaranteed to work. Asuka understood that Maya had offered the suggestion to give the pilots some peace of mind, rather than as an actual option. But if worse came to worst, she'd have to try.

Shinji had once been revived after reaching four hundred percent synchronicity and becoming disembodied within his Eva, but Asuka had no proof that she and Eva-02 were capable of the same feat. Besides, the moon's surface was in turmoil. Its mass—and consequently, her orbital path—were as mercurial as a cat's eyes. Were Asuka to go idle while in a satellite orbit, she might easily become lost in space. And if she found a permanently shaded place to make her temporary roost, a sudden upheaval of the moon's crust could swallow her whole.

Hey, stop that, Asuka told herself. *You're letting negativity into your thoughts.*

"Besides, it wouldn't be like me to go to sleep and wait for someone to come to my rescue."

Several days passed. Aside from environmental dangers presented by the cataclysmic metamorphosis of the moon's crust, Asuka encountered no additional obstacles.

Flying in a low orbit, Eva-02 Allegorica scattered an array of small sensors with as close to even spacing as possible. If the black giant Armaros appeared anywhere within the mesh, the seismographic sensors would almost certainly register the vibrations. Besides, Asuka wanted to gather as much data on the moonquakes as she could. She still didn't understand what was causing the moon to spew lava across nearly half its surface. After the Eva finished deploying the next sensor—the twentieth at least, though Asuka wasn't keeping exact count—she swam gracefully through the weightless air of the entry plug to a compartment in the rear, where she retrieved a pouch of jellied food and a blue plastic bag.

The bag contained various things to keep her occupied on the voyage—video games, digital music, 3D puzzles, photo albums, etc. —all chosen by members of Nerv Japan. She hadn't had time to

look at them before now. Shinji had sent a book filled with artistic photographs of sea life. The book was even waterproof.

"Did you think I was going to read this in the LCL? What are you, stupid?"

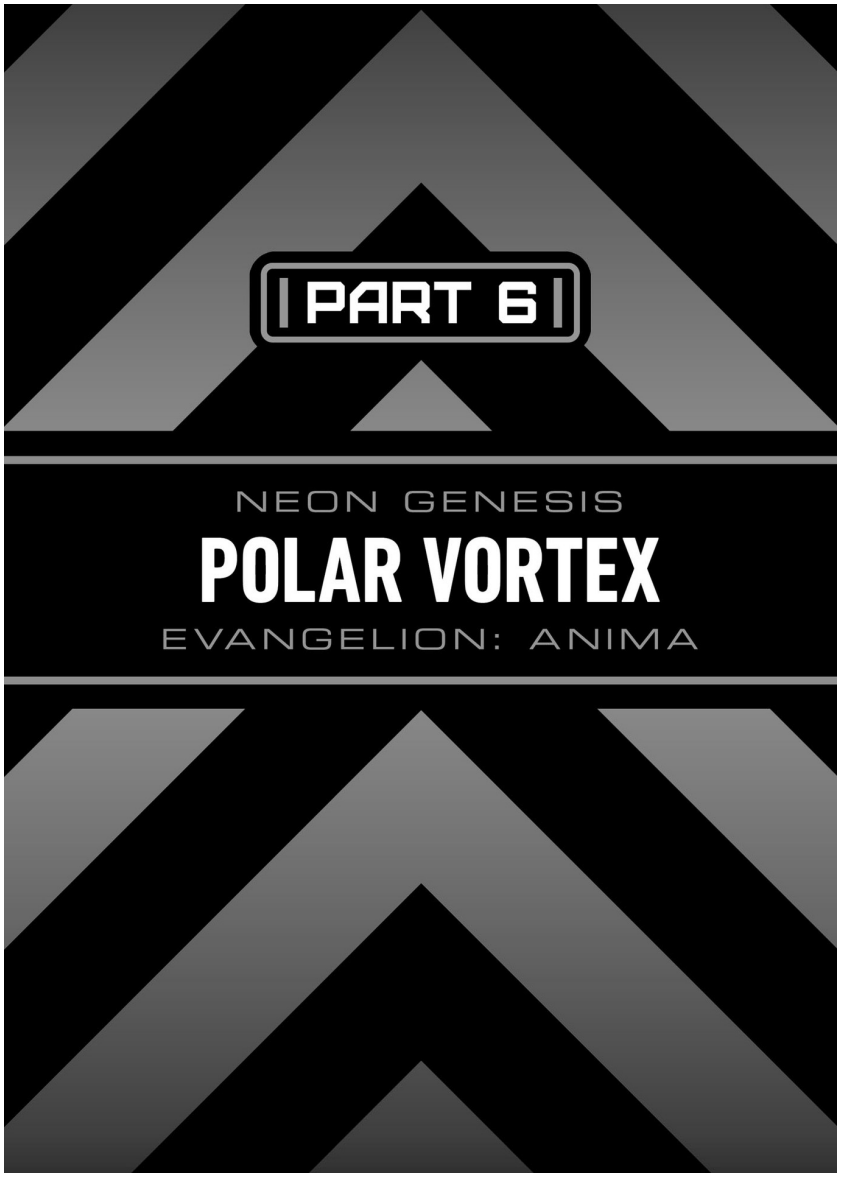
It was classic, witless Shinji. She turned the resin pages.

The ocean, Asuka thought. *I like the ocean.*

Presently, Earth's oceans were in constant turmoil from the tsunamis brought about by massive earthquakes. But Asuka remembered the seas as they used to be—picturesque and beautiful.

A small chime announced the countdown to when the AI would deploy the next sensor.

Asuka was about to witness what Armaros was doing on the moon.


PART 6
NEON GENESIS
POLAR VORTEX
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 20:
The Sealed Space

THE HOLE AT THE CENTER of Nerv Japan HQ formed a perfect circle around which the various modular aboveground facilities slowly circled on concentric rails. At the bottom of the hole was a dome, known as the sarcophagus, which had been sealed away after the Battle at Nerv HQ beneath multiple isolation barriers. Access to the sealed space was tightly restricted—not only for the staff whose work brought them there from time to time, but even for the higher-ranking officers.

Three years ago, when the Human Instrumentality Project failed, Lilith had created a field of stagnant time around itself, now located beneath the dome. Over 150 Nerv employees—including Commander Ikari Gendo and Chief Scientist Akagi Ritsuko—and roughly a dozen JSSDF special forces soldiers were swallowed up by the massive, egg-shaped anomaly. The true nature of the field remained a mystery, but according to the prevailing theory, time on the inside of the field hadn't advanced a single second since its inception.

The field's surface was perfectly smooth, like a mirror, only this mirror reflected no light at all. It was nothing but pure, disorienting darkness, as if someone had cut away a curved slice of space. So unusual was the sight that only by walking around the field, and observing the ruins on the opposite side, could an observer comprehend its spherical nature.

Misato spoke, breaking the silence. Her voice started as a whisper, but fell into heaving sobs by the end.

"Ritsuko. Kaji-kun has… Kaji has become an entirely different person. Only his body is still there. Ritsuko, I… What should I do?!"

As if startled awake by her own sleep talk, Misato suddenly became self-conscious and hurriedly wiped the tears from her cheeks.

What am I doing? This is no time for me to be crying.

She knew she was right. But she didn't want to leave.

Commander Katsuragi was currently the only person allowed to enter the restricted zone without anyone else's permission—or knowledge—which made this the only place where she *could* cry. She was sitting on the ground, in a spot hidden from the surveillance cameras that kept a constant watch over the black egg as she entreated its dark surface.

Help me.

It had all happened so fast after the attack. The next thing she knew, she was the commander of Nerv Japan, holding absolute authority over how and when the Evangelions were used. Above ground, as long as she held that title, everywhere she went, everyone would be watching her with fear as they waited for her to issue her next command.

And right now, I'm crying.

This emotional reaction surprised her. If she'd been the same woman she was three years ago, she could have faced anything—even, hypothetically, Kaji's death—and no matter how shaken, she would still be able to push on to her next action. But this Misato had been brought to a standstill.

Words came out from her that she never thought she could have said.

"I don't give a damn about what happens to the world."

It was only the second time she'd had that thought. The first was as a child, when she was the lone survivor of the apocalypse in Antarctica.

"I want to be with you, Kaji-kun."

"Then let's go see him," said a voice, as the air shook with a jolt.

Misato was so surprised her heart nearly leaped out of her chest. Her arms, which had been hugging her knees, now went flailing, and she almost completely lost her balance before she managed to plant her hands on the ground behind her.

Standing before her was Ayanami Rei Quatre, wearing a black, older-style plugsuit. Behind the girl loomed her giant Eva-0.0,

which crouched on one knee, looking down at Misato.

How did they get here?! This area is underground, completely sealed off and under constant surveillance.

A dust cloud had formed a ring around the intruders, as if the rubble had been displaced by their arrival.

The pair had broken into both Nerv Japan's deepest reaches and Misato's personal and emotional sanctum. The shock left Misato feeling dizzy, but her mind swiftly began to analyze the situation.

The Angel Carriers and Quatre's mutant Eva-0.0 had appeared and disappeared without warning. Between the circumstantial evidence and the impressions of the pilots who'd faced those enemies, the engineering department had suspected that the entities linked to the Q.R. Signum scales might be able to change their spatial position.

Can they shift their location this covertly and without any emissions?

Quatre's mutant Eva-0.0 had been designated hostile when the pair went fugitive. The giant had undergone monstrous transformations, with some components of its body fused together and others missing altogether. In its chest armor, Armaros' black scale emanated an eerie red glow.

"You can show up any place you like." Misato stated the obvious.

Ayanami's red eyes glimmered. "I don't recall ever going to a place I liked. I just move along in the flow."

"The flow?"

"I saw the European Eva's attack. I saw many nations searching for the Ark. But the Earth trembled, and the world slid toward its inevitable end. And the next thing I knew, I had come back here."

"Why?"

"Because Commander Ikari is here. I wish I could melt into that darkness with him."

Misato believed Quatre was speaking the truth—or at least, *her* truth.

“Commander Katsuragi,” Quatre said, “you can cry if you want to. The world is ending, after all. But…”

Misato let out an embarrassed grunt and wiped her cheek.

Quatre took a step forward, closing the distance between them.

“Stop lying to yourself. There is something the real Misato wants to do. And now is the time.”

Quatre said, “The me up there—the me who unifies—doesn’t have such a desire.”

Misato thought, *Who does she mean? Trois?*

After Misato learned of Kaji’s transformation, she’d lost herself completely. She wasn’t entirely sure if she could say how many days had passed.

“Confronted with the idea that she had no real identity, her body and mind were easily stolen by the afterimage of the me the problem solver.”

Misato remembered Maya telling her something about Trois experiencing a state of shock that went beyond the effects of the mental mirror that connected the clones and that Trois had surrendered her mind to Cinq.

Had Quatre been in contact with Trois? Had Trois’ psyche been overwritten, just like Ryoji with Seele?

Suddenly angry, Misato rebutted, “A person’s heart can’t be hijacked so easily! I—”

She trailed off as the doubt crept it.

“If you want to find out,” Quatre said, “you’d better do it now. Humanity is out of time.”

In exchange for the black giant’s power, Eva-0.0 had become deformed. Its crooked armor plates creaked as it reached out to Misato.

Chapter 21:
Buzzing Wings

SHINJI THOUGHT he sensed a living presence nearby. *No, I'm just nervous testing out this new equipment. Focus, Shinji.*

"Maya-san," he said, "what is that…that vibration?"

As soon as he asked, he realized that the shaking was coming from somewhere in his own body.

In Cage Two, on the deck behind and slightly above Super Eva's head, Shinji sat in a simulation plug cradled in the cage's plug insertion arm.

The Eva had been equipped with a supplementary flight unit —a pair of small, hip-mounted wings called the Vertex system. Maya had scheduled a flight test for the afternoon and was running a series of final simulations with the Eva's standard weapons and loadout.

"Vibrations?" the chief scientist asked. "Super Eva isn't picking anything up. Are you possibly getting a signal from somewhere else?"

Maya was inside Super Eva, though her presence was hidden from the giant. From her shoulders up, she wore thought-shielding gear that electromagnetically jammed any signals with wavelengths approaching those of brain waves. Super Eva never shut down, not even during servicing, and mental contamination was an ever-present risk. The chief scientist wore a white lab coat because she didn't want anyone to see her in the plugsuit underneath, which, like all current-gen plugsuits, had the same shielding mechanism as the headgear to safeguard against over-synchronization. She needed this outfit in order to bring her equipment to the entry plug, where she could directly monitor the transmission quality of the command signals.

"Sorry, Maya-san," Shinji said. "I must have been imagining it."

"Wait," Maya replied. "Super Eva has started to shake, too—a

faint tremor, distinct from the heartbeat. It's almost like…it's shivering."

Suddenly, a loud, repetitive rumble sounded in the cage. The sound became more frequent until it was nearly continuous, like the buzzing of an insect's wings, and the drone filled every part of the room.

This was supposed to be a stationary test, Shinji thought. *Something's not right!*

He peeled off the sensor cables attached to his body and leaped from the simulation plug.

Shinji cried out in surprise.

The Vertex flight unit emitted an aurora-like light as Super Eva placed its hands on the platforms to its left and right, pressing outward, until—

CRAAAAAACK!

The Eva broke the suspended platforms. And it kept on moving.

"Maya-san!" Shinji yelled. "It's activating! It's moving! Super Eva and the flight unit, too!"

The flight unit's bug-wing cacophony steadily increased in frequency, going past earsplitting to an almost unbearably shrill noise that reverberated in the brain.

Shinji stumbled over to a support column and slapped the alarm button.

"Everyone, leave the cage immediately," he shouted over the alarm. "Super Eva is moving on its own. In fifteen seconds, I'm deploying the bakelite hard restraint system."

He wasn't even sure if bakelite could hold the Eva in place.

"You're me, aren't you?!" he shouted to Super Eva. "Quit moving on your own! Maya-san, get out of there!"

She didn't respond. Had their communication link been severed somehow? Super Eva was directly in front of him, and he debated leaping onto the top cover of the entry plug. But if he were

to miss the landing… He was as high as the giant's shoulders—a long way from the ground.

He hesitated. But Eva appeared to be nearly free of the restraints around its thighs. If he was going to jump, it was now or —

KATHUNK!

The deck tilted beneath Shinji's feet. A massive boom arm lost its hydraulic pressure and nearly grazed him as it collapsed onto the deck.

If Super Eva and I are one, what happens if I die? Physically speaking, I already died when Rei Quatre's Eva-0.0 annihilated me with that gamma-ray laser. This body is my reincarnation, born along with Super Eva's heartbeat from an extradimensional window. If I'm not with Super Eva, I become unstable on a quantum level. Can I even die in the traditional sense?

Now!

Shinji leaped toward the Eva.

Swung about by the rampaging Eva, Shinji pulled a lever located on the external armor plating and extracted the entry plug. But that wasn't enough to halt Eva-01. Ever since the giant had gained a heartbeat, Super Eva had no shutoff mode.

Shinji tumbled into the entry plug.

"Shinji-kun!"

"Maya, this is bad." Shinji glanced at the Eva's internal signal monitors, which showed nothing but malfunctions, and then looked to the chief scientist, who was doing all she could to remain upright. "Give me sight, please."

"I don't know why the Eva went online," Maya said as she unplugged the cable for the data logger from the center console.

One by one, the various status windows winked out, relinquishing the display to the external cameras, which showed the disaster unfolding within the cage.

"It doesn't look like we're getting down from here," Maya remarked.

Bakelite surged into the chamber.

Shinji saw something on the gangway of the armored wall directly ahead. *Is that…a person?*

I told everyone to escape!

The figure was wearing a black, outdated plugsuit.

Ayanami…Quatre?! Impossible. Shinji squinted and leaned forward for a closer look, but with the sound of shattering resin, the Eva's view rapidly shifted upward, and Shinji lost sight of the figure.

The bakelite had flowed around Super Eva's legs and hardened instantaneously to stop the giant's movement. But Super Eva effortlessly broke its legs free and began climbing up the hardening fluid.

"Am I seeing things?" Shinji asked himself. "I don't know what to believe."

The figure Shinji thought he saw would have to wait. Right now, he needed to find some way to regain control of Super Eva.

"Shinji-kun, here!" Maya said as she attempted to move herself out of the pilot's seat.

"No, Maya-san, you sit."

Maya was wearing every conceivable piece of gear that could prevent mental contamination between herself and the Eva. Her brain waves were blocked from reaching the Eva, and the Eva's awareness was blocked from reaching her. But the technique these countermeasures employed was akin to drowning out noise with louder noise. No technology existed that could isolate a person's mental waves in the truest sense.

"I'm sorry about this," Shinji said, removing the white lab coat Maya had put on over her plugsuit.

Maya yelped as he pressed her shoulders against the seat. A latching sound came from behind her back, and she was secured in place. She gave Shinji an indignant look, but if she'd been thrown forward, deeper into the Eva, her equipment might not have been able to prevent contamination.

Shinji stood next to the seat and held the grip from the side. The next moment, both of them felt the weight lift from their backs —still out of control, Super Eva had decided it would fly.

Shinji needed to take charge. Reluctantly, he said, “I’m bringing in the LCL.”

Maya took a deep breath. “Okay. Do it.”

The plug filled with LCL. This was Maya’s first time breathing the fluid, and it was as rough on her as could be expected.

But the medium provided a direct link that transmitted the Eva’s perceptions to its pilot, so Shinji once again had command of the disoriented giant’s senses. Now he could restore communications with the command center.

He did so, and Toji’s voice came over the speakers immediately.

< < Shinji! Tell me what the hell is going on, will ya?! > >

“Well, ah… A rampage!”

< < What?! What are you doing that for? You should know better than that! > >

“No, *Super Eva* is rampaging. The bakelite containment system failed, the flight unit activated, and it’s putting out some kind of light that breaks everything it touches! Maya-san is in the plug with me.”

< < Can’t you eject the flight unit? > >

Maya winced and shook her head.

“She says it’s not responding,” Shinji reported.

< < Well, just stay where you are! > >

“I’m telling you, we’re about to go into the air!”

Chapter 22:
Fragile and Perilous

SUPER EVA'S HOVERING MECHANISM didn't work like Eva-02's or Euro-II's graviton-based Allegorica system. Instead, the Vertex system used an A.T. Field to create variances in the density of air through which the Eva could float.

Flight had been envisioned as one possible application of the A.T. Field deflection technology developed for the Eva-01 Type-F, back when the Eva was a testing platform. But in its former state, Eva-01 hadn't been able to generate an A.T. Field of sufficient magnitude to enable flight—not even in momentary bursts, let alone a sustained duration—and so the work was shelved. But with the tremendous strength of Super Eva's A.T. Field, the experimental technology was finally becoming reality.

A second pair of Allegorica wings, like those that had made a Pegasus out of Eva-02, were currently under construction in Cage One for eventual installation on Eva-00 Type-F, but between the N_2 reactor, the graviton governors, phase-space interference technology, and the various tech to bring it all together, the wings alone contained more parts than the Eva's body. It wasn't something that could be built quickly.

Compared to those massive, extravagant wings, Maya called Super Eva's small wings "a human-powered aircraft that only a brute could fly." Whereas the Allegorica was a distillation of human engineering and craft, these wings enabled the Eva to bend the laws of physics. The process was especially distasteful to the engineer when combined with Super Eva's outrageous origins and power. Shinji didn't understand that kind of thinking, but when he'd seen those small wings under construction, with their arrays of field-guiding plates, he'd thought they looked like paper airplanes.

Because the flight system required Super Eva and Shinji's concerted effort to generate a continuous, high-power A.T. Field, maybe it *was* like a human-powered aircraft.

Can I really catch up to Asuka like this? We're talking about a

flight all the way to the moon .

At last, the Eva began to rise.

"I…I can't keep my feet on the ground," Shinji said.

KREEEEE!

Super Eva's fingers slid sideways across the hardened bakelite like nails on a chalkboard.

We're flying! But—

"Oh no!"

The giant couldn't stabilize itself and crashed into the surrounding structures. Anything caught in the gentle glow of Super Eva's wings, and the subsequent bending of space, was shaken about, twisted, and broken by the violent phasing.

Hyuga's voice came over the comm.

< < The walls have taken all the punishment they can. The cage is going to collapse! > >

Shinji tried to find anything for Super Eva to grab hold of to catch its balance, but the giant was rampaging and wouldn't let Shinji direct any fine movements. He at last got his Eva to grab on to whatever it could, which turned out to be a long column that came loose with hardly any resistance. It was Euro-II's cross-shaped spear.

"Sh-Shinji-kun!" Maya cried out.

Shinji looked to her, and then Super Eva fell toward the cage's ceiling.

Chapter 23:
To the Sky

THE COMMAND CENTER was physically separated from the rest of the facility by its earthquake-dampening structure, and its occupants didn't feel anything at all. The thickly armored walls completely insulated the noise, too. The room fell silent as everyone waited for any news to come.

A second later, an operator shouted, "Outside!"

The main display switched to a rooftop camera elsewhere on the base, and there was Super Eva. Having blasted its way through the cage's armored roof, the giant sprang into the sky.

"Not again!" Toji moaned. "Can't you ever leave the normal way?"

"But…" Aoba said. "That's incredible. It's flying."

"Its flight wasn't scheduled until *this afternoon.* And the test was supposed to take place on the floating deck on Lake Ashi. But now look at all this destruction. That fool! Who does he think has to pay for all this?!"

Not long ago, the teenager would have been hollering in celebration, but in a short span of time, he'd completely assimilated into his role as Acting Deputy Commander. Aoba and Hyuga looked at each other and snickered.

On its maiden flight, Super Eva wasn't going to win any points for style. Not only had the giant gone ass over teakettle, it was spinning around and around.

Having gotten accustomed to breathing in the LCL, Maya suggested, "Shinji-kun, open up the Vertex wings as far as they'll go and spread them to their full width."

"O-okay."

The retractable wings extended a little farther, and the outer edge of the field guidance plates distanced themselves from the Eva's body. With just that slight change, the Eva's uncontrolled

twirling motion stabilized.

"Oh," Shinji said. "Is that all I have to do to control the flight?"

"No. Extending the wings increases stability at the expense of slower responsiveness and decreased mobility—like widening the arms of a balancing toy. It's grade-school-level science. But it's up to you to find the right adjustments."

Maya had given the system a Latin name—vertex, referring to a point of rotation in the sky, like those that occurred at the celestial poles. Later, when the wings were formally assigned a name, a clerical error resulted in the English spelling being used in conjunction with Super Eva, which led to most people calling this configuration the Super Eva Vortex or Vortex Eva.

Quatre was watching. "Those wings will provoke Armaros," she remarked.

Chapter 24:
Black Intention

"CAGE TWO will be out of commission for a while," Aoba said.

"What a mess." Toji scratched the back of his head.

"What?" said Ayanami Six from behind him.

He turned to little Six, who had been sticking by his side, even coming to the command center. She was trembling and staring off into the distance.

"Shinji-kun, try to stay inside the caldera," Toji said. "If you leave our territory, it'll cause me all sorts of trouble."

Keeping one eye on Super Eva's wild flight, which continued on the main display, Toji hooked his foot around the leg of a nearby chair and pulled it over to Six, who plopped herself down on the seat.

"What's up?" he asked. "Not feeling good?"

Then Toji noticed something curious. Near Six was a round, roughly fifty-centimeter tall Type-N robot. Each Ayanami had been assigned one to monitor their physical condition. This one was receiving such a massive deluge of data that it began to emit

an error tone, followed by a puff of smoke, and then the machine toppled over sideways.

The nearby personnel noticed something was wrong. They rushed over to Six, but Toji held them back.

"Wait!" the acting deputy commander said. He suspected he knew what was going on. "This is that thing again, isn't it? Someone start recording!"

Before anyone could ask what Toji meant, Six began to speak.

"That…must not be… I will not permit the living…to gain wings."

Those who had been present the previous time recognized with a shudder that another proclamation had arrived.

The black giant, Armaros, once again spoke its words through an Ayanami's lips.

"Humankind is to be fettered to the Earth's surface…to squirm on the ground. To wander, constantly… That is the condition I permit for humanity… Its fate."

Toji made a snap judgment.

"Issue a Level One alert to all relevant departments of the UN and the Japanese government," he ordered.

With a look of confusion, Hyuga said, "But nothing's actually happened yet."

"Doesn't matter," Toji replied. "If I'm premature, we'll just consider ourselves lucky to have time to prepare before something comes. And let's request Commander Katsuragi's presence one more time." He looked around and then added, "Activate all municipal combat sectors for defensive operations!"

When the high schooler's command was met with hesitation, Hyuga spoke firmly, making his voice heard on all decks. "In Commander Katsuragi's absence, Acting Deputy Commander Suzuhara has the command! Execute his orders immediately!"

Chapter 25:
Three Plus Five

THE MEDICAL TEAM rushed from the Ayanamis' tuning room. Arriving at the command center, they hooked Six up to their equipment and began monitoring her physical state.

Her small body trembled as she muttered, "Humanity…shall not…attain wings."

Assuming that Quatre was acting as a proxy for Armaros—with the black giant's thoughts pouring into her through the Q.R. Signum he'd embedded into her Eva's chest—Six's behavior could be explained by a sympathetic induction through the Ayanamis' mental link.

"We can't have wings?" Toji said incredulously. "That doesn't make any sense. Humans have been able to fly for a long time now. Hell, the mass-production Evas could fly three years ago, and right now we have two active Evas with wings. So what's all this about?"

"Super Eva is probably special," one technician said. "Armaros didn't show up and start causing all these disasters until Super Eva got a heartbeat."

"He's talking like Super Eva is representing the human race," another said.

Toji listened to the operators' chatter as he watched the militarized city prepare itself. He wanted to send out Eva-00 Type-F from Cage One, but Six's current state gave him serious doubts about Trois' combat readiness. The girl's situation was already tangled…but this was an emergency. He decided he'd ask her directly.

"Hello, Ayanami?" he said into his headset. "I don't know if you're Cinq or Trois right now, but can you respond?"

< < I can go, > > Ayanami said.

"Ok," Toji said. Then, looking at his display, he sputtered, "Wait, what? Huh?"

Toji had assumed Ayanami was still in her private quarters, but the blinking dot that represented Trois' position showed her already at the door to Eva-00 Type-F's cage. A video communications window opened, in which Ayanami was wearing another set of the same thought-shielding gear that Maya was using.

"I get it," Toji said. "Good thinking!"

< < With this on, Armaros' thoughts don't seem to influence my own. Although, I might have a hard time raising my synchronization rate to a functional level. > >

"Maya-san," Toji said, "run the calculations on whether you can reduce the thought shield's effectiveness to a point where Armaros can't reach her mind but she can still control her Eva." He blinked in realization and then scowled. "Wait a minute, Maya's not here right now!"

"I'll do it," Hyuga said.

According to protocol, Trois should have been taken to the intelligence division's interrogation office, where a tediously lengthy test would be conducted to determine whether or not Ayanami's actions could be trusted. Toji skipped over all of that. It was a terribly reckless decision that didn't escape Hyuga's notice, but the technician thought—somewhat to his own wonder—that under the circumstances, Toji's decision to be flexible was the right one.

"So, Ayanami-san," Toji said. "Is it okay that I call you Trois? Or should I call you Cinq? Or maybe I should add the three and the five and make it eight."

The four clones had been given numbers, in French, solely to prevent confusion when referring to a particular one.

Toji had heard the speculation that Ayanami Rei Trois had been overwritten by Cinq when the clone died between Earth and the moon. Right now, the girl was displaying quick thinking that struck him more like Cinq, and her facial expressions seemed a little more adult than before. But suddenly, her expression changed.

< < Not eight, > > she said softly but firmly, which caught Toji by surprise.

That's hardly what matters right now. What made her react so

strongly?

"Oh," Toji said aloud in realization. *In French, eight sounds a lot like Shinji's mom's name. Huit. Yui.*

"You're Trois now, aren't you?" Toji asked, but she'd already hung up on him. Toji had seen that Trois was still there, somewhere in her own body, no matter what the rumors said.

"Well," Toji said with mock indignation. "They say you don't have a personality, but it seems to me like you can assert yourself just fine."

Ayanami's location marker overlapped Eva-00 Type-F's, and its label switched to "piloting."

Chapter 26:
Hostile Signal Blue

AS SIX REPEATED THE MESSAGE from the enigmatic black giant, Nerv Japan stood prepared to meet the enemy, whoever they might be.

Meanwhile, Shinji was trying to convince Super Eva to land, but the Eva kept drifting about in circles above the base. To provide cover for this mishap, Shinji and Super Eva had been retroactively assigned patrol duty.

This was not the first time Super Eva had acted against Shinji's commands. Sometimes the Eva's ferocious side took over, while other times its reaction had been delayed—but this was something different.

If he was going to go into battle impaired like this, Shinji thought he should at least have a weapon ready. The Powered 8 carbine was stored on a rail in Super Eva's left shoulder. He took hold of the weapons and attempted to raise the Eva's arm—but as he did so, the right wing's A.T. Field became unfocused, and Super Eva made a sharp roll.

Shinji yelped in surprise, while Maya protested, "What are you doing?!"

What just happened? Shinji wondered.

He made another small movement, and this time the left leg responded.

"Maya-san, control of Super Eva's limbs and my perception of the wings keep getting switched up with each other. And there's not a pattern to—"

"What's that sound?" Maya interjected.

Ayanami's voice came over the plug's hydrospeaker.

< < The surface world… Atop the Earth… Wandering… Continuing eternal… The fate of humanity… > >

“Trois?” Maya asked, but Shinji grimaced.

Now he knew that what he’d seen in the cage had been no trick of the eyes. She was there. The transmission was coming from somewhere very close by, and the IFF identification system registered an Eva he’d previously classified as hostile.

“Command, this is an emergency! I’m picking up Quatre’s signal!”

Hyuga replied.

< < Shinji-kun, if you’re talking about Armaros’ message—Six is in some kind of trance down here. She’s going on just like when Armaros used Quatre to make Trois speak. > >

“Hyuga, I’m sorry I didn’t say anything, but right before we started flying, I saw an Ayanami in a black, older-model plugsuit. I thought I was just seeing things…but Quatre and her Eva-0.0 are somewhere in this facility. Damn it, something is messing up all my readings—I’m picking up responses from all over the base.”

Shinji was flying over the center of Nerv HQ. Through the round chasm, he saw the mutant Eva-0.0 standing quietly atop the dome of the sarcophagus.

“Command, I found the Eva! It’s on the sarcophagus.”

As the comms line from the command center erupted, Ayanami Rei Quatre stood on the shoulder of her mutant Eva and looked up toward Shinji.

Without making a conscious decision, Shinji zoomed in on Quatre, who wore the older black plugsuit.

She’s pointing at something. But what?

The dome beneath the opening was deeper than an Eva was tall and lower than the surface of Lake Ashi. From down there, in the direction Quatre was pointing, there was nothing but the walls of the underground facility.

No, wait—look closer.

Quatre’s eyes remained on Shinji. Her lips moved, and her

voice rattled in the plug's hydrospeaker.

< < Humanity…lives… As long as they live…they shall not obtain wings…shall not be liberated. I mean you, Ikari-kun. > >

"Command," Shinji said, "is there anything unusual south of HQ?"

But the reply was dismissive. < < Super Eva, remain focused on Quatre. > >

Quatre continued. < < He saw you through my eyes. Through Eva-0.0's eyes. You were seeking wings. Is the Second Child that important to you? > >

"We can't attack her while she's on top of the sarcophagus," Toji said.

In the command center, the staff were arguing over how to evict Quatre's Eva from atop the dome. No one could agree on a solution because no one knew how the Chronostatic Sphere would react.

"Ayahachi!" Toji said, determined to make the *eight* reference work. "Can you see Unit Quatre on the sarcophagus from the Komagatake sniping post? Can you shoot it?"

< < I can't see the Eva. I can shoot it, but the dome would be destroyed. > >

"That's no good! Damn… Maybe it would've been better to fire up from the lower levels of the cage."

Either way, he didn't want to make one Ayanami shoot another.

< < Command! Toji! > > Shinji's voice had risen to an angry yell. < < I'm seeing enemies on the caldera's southern side! > >

But it was Ayanami in Eva-00 Type-F who replied.

< < I can see them from the Komagatake sniping post. Two unknowns to the south, on the western ridgeline of Mount Daikan. > >

The clamor in the command center fell into momentary

silence as all eyes fixed on the main screen. Across Lake Ashi, on the ridgeline of mountains that had been reshaped again and again by battle, stood two shadows.

Not shadows…something black.

"The black giant," whispered a technician.

"Wait," Toji interjected, "Armaros is on the moon. Besides, whatever those are, there's two of them."

"Pattern undetectable," Hyuga reported. "Our probe signals are passing straight through them!"

Once more, intruders had appeared without any advance warning or observed emissions.

Hyuga said, "Everyone, stay calm! They're not the same shape as Armaros. They each have only one rear plate, not two, and they're only about as big as an Eva. Armaros was bigger."

"But they clearly have something to do with Armaros," Aoba replied. "You can bet on it!"

The two black figures moved.

"Movement from Victor Two and Victor Three!" Hyuga said.

For the time being, he called them by the designations assigned to unknown figures by the Magi system. Presently, Quatre's Eva was Victor One. Enemies detected visually were designated V—phonetically, Victor—and any detected by radar were assigned R—or Romeo. Lately, there had been almost all Victors and very few Romeos. The enemy just had to be difficult like that.

The two black giants approached the top of the ridgeline and stood with their rear plates touching.

DWUM!

When the two plates touched, they made an eerie sound like the clapping of a bell—except it wasn't any ordinary sound. It reached through the thick, armored walls of the command center.

"Wh-what is that?" Aoba asked. "Is it a single unit that can

split into two and rejoin, like the Angel Israfel?"

RUMMMBLE.

But the two giants didn't fuse. They separated again, and the ground trembled. As their rear plates pulled apart, the space between them revealed scenery that looked nothing like the southern side of Lake Ashi. Between the plates, it was night. Dusk, maybe. And as the two giants grew farther apart, the view expanded to fill the area between them.

"Is that…a video?" Aoba said.

RUMMMBLE .

The command center vibrated as if a great metal door was drawing open.

As the view of this other place widened, the two giants began to fade, as though their essences were being stretched thin.

And then— *SLAM!*

Everyone who was standing reflexively clung to the nearest fixed surface. The jolt felt like a door being thrown all the way open, and the vibrations continued to ripple through every surface.

"Victors Two and Three are…gone?" Hyuga said.

Had the danger passed? The giants had disappeared, but the mysterious window into another landscape remained.

A soft light flickered in the distance of this twilight landscape. The light pushed through like lapping waves, and warm air spilled through the window.

A frantic-looking guard appeared on the screen. < < South shore security post to command center! Two of the watchers—they turned into salt! Beware! The light…the wind…the sweet air— > >

There was a rustling sound, and the guard suddenly turned into a white pillar and crumbled. Gasps echoed all over the control room.

Strange ripples began to shimmer in the air, spreading out from the window toward Tokyo-3 in the shape of a fan.

Hyuga leaped to his feet. "We've lost contact with fifteen outdoor observation posts."

“T-tell everyone who’s outside to take shelter immediately!” Toji shouted.

Hyuga and Aoba began relaying the command with more detailed instructions to the various teams.

“All personnel proceed to the anticontamination areas! Seal all partitions! Ensure all indoor spaces have positive air pressure!”

Envisioning the apocalyptic mass transformation of 1.9 million Europeans into pillars of salt, Toji said, “We need to instruct all civilians to avoid looking into that light!”

Shinji’s voice announced another danger.

< < Command! Something is coming out! > >

No sooner had Shinji spoken than three Angel Carriers emerged from the window.

And these Carriers had wings.

Gunfire roared from the city’s defensive stations, and their projectiles exploded into the cluster of Angel Carriers on the caldera’s southern rim. But the enemy withstood the attack with their invisible shields as their wings lifted them effortlessly into the air.

One Carrier seemed to bear Zeruel in its cocoon. The larva fired flashes of tremendously destructive energy beams that destroyed armed sector after armed sector, leaving behind cross-shaped pillars of light that raced toward the heavens.

In moments, the Angel’s attacks had wiped out seventy percent of the city’s offensive capabilities. On the status board, the southern side of Tokyo-3 was nearly entirely red.

“Incredible…” Aoba said.

“Command to Ayahachi,” Toji said. “Don’t attack them yet! Just one of those blasts will chew through the sniping post’s heavy armor like it was nothing. Hide yourself and wait for your time to strike.”

< < Unit Zero Type-F, acknowledged. > >

The sniping post at Mount Komagatake went silent as commanded, and the Zeruel Carrier flew through the air, almost

drifting, until it found Super Eva.

Chapter 27:
Kaworu Visits

< <HUMANITY MUST NOT …desire wings…or obtain them. > >

Quatre's voice continued to force Armaros' message into Super Eva's cockpit.

"So, what then," Shinji said, "have you come to punish us for getting wings? I see *your* side has wings now, but that's okay, is it?"

Why can't humankind fly? Are we supposed to wait until after we're dead?

< < It's because you'll be liberated. > >

This voice was different.

"Kaworu-kun?" Shinji asked.

"Huh?" Maya responded. "What did you say just now?"

But Shinji didn't answer, instead replying with a question of his own. "Is it possible that your command optimizations could be causing the opposite effect?"

Maya tilted her head to the side in doubt. "Without the optimizations, you wouldn't be able to perceive the wings as part of your body."

"I think that's the problem. I can sense the wings, but I still feel like I have four limbs. I keep getting confused. Are the wings my arms? Or are they my legs?"

Maya shifted. "Go on."

"I want to try to find them *through* Super Eva. I don't know if I can, but I want to try. I'd like to return to the Type-F's field generation format."

"If you do that, we'll fall from the sky."

"We should be so lucky."

“Even when there’s an enemy right in front of us?”

“Without any control, we’re just a balloon up here,” Shinji said with a confidence he didn’t entirely feel.

The scientist sighed through the LCL and pressed a button on the controls. Shinji felt the constricted A.T. Field gradually spread out across his skin.

Is this what Kaworu-kun meant by being set free?

That was when the Zeruel Carrier’s powerful beam struck him. Super Eva’s field held out, but the force of the impact sent them careening helplessly through the sky.

Shinji grunted. If the cockpit hadn’t been filled with liquid, he would’ve been crushed by the force, even if Super Eva remained unharmed.

Maya appeared terrified half to death, but Shinji felt something altogether different.

He was more aware now of his A.T. Field. Something prickled at his senses—and not the impact of the tremendous heat from the Angel’s direct hit, but something narrower; something smaller, more distant, and sharp.

Someone is watching me.

Shinji felt the gaze of the black giant, Armaros, and it was even stronger than Zeruel’s fierce attack.

His heart—and Super Eva’s—began to beat faster and faster.

Chapter 28:
Spread the Wings of War

JUST AS ZERUEL'S BEAM blasted the flying Super Eva even higher into the sky, the soft light around its wings faded, and—just as Maya predicted—Super Eva began to fall, face up.

Maya's inner ears announced the sudden drop, and her instinctive fear was about to manifest as a scream when Shinji asked her a question seemingly out of the blue.

"What's the difference between flying by knowledge or by technology?"

"What?"

Maya looked at Shinji. Was he…trembling? No, but his hands were as they tightly gripped the control stick. He seemed to be fighting with all his strength—but fighting *what* ?

Urgently trying to find the right words, Shinji asked, "What's the difference between climbing a mountain…and…and constructing a building?"

"What are you talking about, Shinji-kun?" Maya asked.

"I have to stop this thing, whatever it takes. I don't care if I need to argue it to a standstill!"

"What do you mean?" Maya asked.

"Look forward! Turn your head. A big wave is coming, and I don't want you to lose your head when it hits."

WHAM!

Shinji felt like a tsunami had struck him.

The impact caused the supersaturated gases in the LCL to instantaneously form tiny bubbles. The interior of the entry plug clouded with white.

I can't see my own hands!

The flow from the circulation system pushed the bubbles away

and revealed an enemy right in front of Shinji's face—a winged Angel Carrier. The six-kilometer distance separating the Carrier and Super Eva had disappeared in an instant.

I'm too close to use the spear, Shinji thought. He wanted to kick the Carrier away, but the enemy was too close for that, too. And too fast.

He felt resistance on his right knee, and the sensation of something smashing apart. Super Eva's knee shield had found Shinji's intended target, and the Carrier's head—and the chest to which it was attached—went flying, shattered into countless fragments.

Maya, who seemed distressed by the whole ordeal, watched the aftermath of Super Eva's strike with surprise, but for some reason, the scientist's movements appeared unnaturally sluggish.

"He did that in a single attack?!" Aoba exclaimed.

"He traveled 5.8 kilometers in an instant," Hyuga said.

Super Eva's reality-defying dash attack created a shock wave that smashed into Nerv HQ's armored walls, and the rumble was heard and felt in the command center, causing no small amount of surprise. Even as the shock wave spread thin, it retained enough energy to strike the caldera's outer mountains and echo back several times inside the rim.

"Incredible," Aoba whispered.

But whenever humanity deepened their understanding of Evangelions, the page always turned to a new, even more baffling mystery. Now was no different, as the aboveground observation cameras captured images of the contrail Super Eva left in its wake, stretching and widening like nothing they'd seen before.

"That shouldn't happen just from the expanded A.T. Field's distortion field and phase light," Hyuga said. "That isn't the theorized effect."

The band of light lengthened and spread open like a blooming flower.

Whatever the concerns of the technicians in the command

center, Shinji felt himself gaining control over his wings. He could now make maneuvers like in the simulations—aside from the instant acceleration, at least. That hadn't been in the simulations at all. But he was getting used to the speed, too, as his mind and body began to adapt and respond. He felt as if a strong force was driving into his back. He couldn't control the effect, at least not yet, but it was a start.

"We're going to get through this," Shinji said. "Maya-san, just hang in there a little longer."

Maya was beginning to lose consciousness. Shinji later learned that in that moment, she saw him controlling the Eva without moving a muscle and speaking through the terminal's hydrospeaker without opening his mouth. She described him, without exaggeration, as "stiff as a rock."

When Toji asked Shinji about the mysterious trail of patterned light, the deputy commander, too, acted in slow motion.

"What the heck is that, Shinji?!"

Shinji could hear the commotion in the command center, but he didn't know what had gotten them so worked up. *What are they seeing?*

Shinji recognized that he and Super Eva were moving through time differently than everyone else, and he sensed that was dangerous. But it felt good. And the excitement—thrill, even—far outweighed his worry.

The condition of humanity, having undone the knot. The nature of humanity, teeming, refuses the shackles. The distant and immaculate—

"Kaworu-kun? Don't be so cryptic! Tell me what you mean."

Be careful. Having opened the y-axis, humanity expands endlessly.

They will be unable to return to the human vessel.

The shackles of the Earth are many things but also a safety net.

Despite having its head and chest torn away, the Angel Carrier hadn't gone still.

But Super Eva, leaving a trail of light as it flew, seemed unwilling to stop or even slow its momentum, and crossed the sky toward its next enemy.

The mutilated Carrier doggedly attempted to pursue Super Eva and was turning in midair, slow and unsteady, when a burst of particles, tiny in size but possessing tremendous energy, pierced through its power source—the Q.R. Signum—at the speed of light.

The shot had come from Mount Komagatake at the center of the caldera, cradle to Lake Ashi and Tokyo-3, where Ayanami's Eva-00 Type-F had fired the Field Piercer—a.k.a. the Angel's Backbone—a weapon that had replaced its entire right arm. Ayanami targeted the Carrier's remaining Q.R. Signum and fired once more, and the Carrier fell toward the Earth without ever getting the chance to reveal which Angel's larva it had carried in its cocoon.

Super Eva flew onward, as if gliding on the light the giant had left in its wake. The light flashed even more brightly, searing the sky, and the Eva disappeared, leaving behind a shock wave from where the air was torn asunder. This time, Shinji was ready with the Euro-II's lance. The next Angel Carrier brought up its shield. In an instant, the space between the opponents vanished, and the cross-shaped tip of the lance drove into the winged Carrier's shield.

Shinji roared as the spear and shield clashed. The barrier held, even in the face of Super Eva's newfound strength, but it was being pushed inward. Like the rest of the Carrier, the shield was powered by the two Q.R. Signum scales. One overheated and broke down. The scale didn't even have time to crystalize before it burst, spewing out a blood-red fluid. The lance easily penetrated the now-weakened shield, and Shinji drove his weapon into the Carrier's throat and out through its back.

Before he could push the Carrier away and take off into the sky again, a double helix of light flew out from the Carrier's cocoon and latched onto Super Eva.

"Armisael!" Shinji said.

The helix's sharp tip drove itself into the center of Super Eva's heartbeat, the window to the higher dimensions. It bulged, like a

snake that had eaten something larger than itself, and with each pulse of Super Eva's heart, the torrential energy rushed into Armisael, swelling it further. The helix tried to break free, but Super Eva grasped it in its left hand and refused to let go. Armisael ballooned, losing any semblance of its actual form. In the next instant, the Angel imploded, becoming a dim speck that wobbled and spun like a top, spewing a bar of fierce light from its center axis.

Super Eva crushed the dot in its fist, and Shinji felt tremendous power flow back into him. Brimming with energy, he hoisted the still-living Angel Carrier with the lance impaled in its throat and turned.

Maya had fallen unconscious, but that was probably for the best. She didn't have to witness Super Eva running roughshod over her beloved laws of physics.

"Human nature…" Six imparted. "Their deeds never cease… Their greed knows no bounds… They consume all."

The Armisael Carrier still lived. Super Eva held the zombie in front of itself like a shield to block the Zeruel Carrier's energy beams. By the time Super Eva reached Zeruel, the Armisael Carrier's limbs had been blasted away until all that was left was a grisly chunk of torso.

Somehow, miraculously, the remaining Q.R. Signum had survived intact in its flesh, which the scale kept alive, though it was on the brink of death. Shinji ripped the scale out, turning in the same motion. He slipped past the Zeruel Carrier's sharp, band-like arms, and struck its shield with the detached Q.R. Signum.

The twin scales glimmered, recognizing each other as allies, and unwittingly invited Super Eva through the shield. Shinji reached inside with a hand that had—at some point unknown even to himself—switched out the lance for a gun. He swung inward, smashing the Zeruel Carrier's Q.R. Signum with the gun's grip. As the weapon passed in front of the Carrier's face on the follow-through, Shinji jammed the barrel into the Carrier's eye socket and fired.

The KEG-46R Yamato Rebuild wasn't an energy-based weapon —electromagnetic, particle, optical, or otherwise. It was kinetic, a modern recreation of the largest battleship cannon from the previous century. Its one-ton shell entered the back of the Angel Carrier's skull at roughly twice the speed of sound. Before the other eye could blink, the shell tore apart everything inside, leaving only the face armor behind.

"The method of instrumentalization…" Quatre intoned. "A test to banish the circle of sin… The trial ended in failure. Preparations to await the next test… This world will be cleared away. That's right, Ikari-kun, it's all over. It ended three years ago when you destroyed the Human Instrumentality Project."

Super Eva gripped Zeruel's limp, ribbon-like arms as if they were reins and stood on top of the plummeting giant. The Eva planted its feet on the Carrier and accelerated. The pair crashed like a meteorite into the ground beyond the northwestern edge of the caldera.

A large column of dust rose from the far side of the mountains, and the Earth shook. When Super Eva came climbing over the ridgeline and planted a foot on one of the peaks, the command center personnel erupted into cheers, though what they really felt was terror.

Super Eva took Zeruel's remaining Q.R. Signum in both hands, squeezing and twisting until the scale broke.

Chapter 29:
Predation

THE WINGED CARRIER shot down by the Eva-00 Type-F fell to Earth at the southern outskirts of Tokyo-3 on the shores of Lake Ashi. The Carrier was without a head or upper chest, one Q.R. Signum had been destroyed, and its cocoon had apparently been lost in the crash—but the second shot of the Angel's Backbone had failed to destroy the second Signum. When Quatre and her mutant Eva-0.0 came upon the Carrier, the undead giant was still writhing on the ground.

"Be my body," Quatre said.

The pair's Q.R. Signums flashed in consonance, and the mutant Eva-0.0 thrust its gamma-ray laser cannon into the Carrier's body and began absorbing its material. The disassembled pieces slithered up the cannon's magnetic convergence guide and melted into the Eva's body.

Misato watched this strange process of disassembly and reconstruction through the gaps between the fingers of Eva-0.0's left hand.

On the way here, Misato had seen several columns of salt, but the sweetly fragrant wind seemed not to affect her as long as she was with the Eva. But even without the threat of salinization, she had no means of escaping from the giant's hand.

Quatre looked at her and said, "That must be the promised land, flowing with honey. Ironic that you can't go near."

Having finished the absorption process, Quatre's Eva-0.0 had gained a second Q.R. Signum and sprouted the Carrier's wings, though they were black now. The Eva flapped its wings, scattering nearby objects, and twirled into the sky.

"Strange," remarked Quatre to herself. "Flying got you all worked up, Ikari-kun, but I don't feel any excitement at all. I thought this would give me *something* ."

By taking to the air, the mutant Eva-0.0 revealed its location

to the Nerv command center. The remaining portion of the city's defenses trained their weapons on the Eva, but Hyuga shouted, "Hold your fire! Misato-san—Commander Katsuragi's ID tag is responding!"

Without touching any controls, Shinji magnified his vision and saw that Quatre's Eva-0.0 was holding a person in its hand.

"Super Eva to command center. I can confirm. It's true!"

Maya woke and saw that Shinji was speaking with his own mouth now. His mysterious hardening seemed to have passed; he also seemed not to have noticed that it had happened in the first place.

"Quatre!" he demanded. "What are you doing with Misato-san?"

< < Misato is doing what she wants. > >

"What?"

Maya was just as surprised. *Is she honestly suggesting that Misato is acting of her own free will?*

The Mutant Eva-0.0 flapped its wings several times and then passed through the window to the other world that the Carriers had created.

Once more, Super Eva displayed astounding acceleration, but the window closed before he could reach it. He flew over barren mountains pockmarked with craters, a terrible sight made only worse by his shock wave.

Toji ordered a VTOL to prepare for takeoff.

"I'll be back in two hours," he said. "No, make that ninety minutes. Update me by text."

Hyuga looked confused. "Where are you going at a time like this?"

Seeing Misato being carried away had shaken Toji, but he did his best to suppress the feeling.

Toji glanced at Rei Six. She'd come out of her trance but was

slumped over in her chair, speechless and looking hurt. He cast his gaze around the command center, from the Eva status board that read “Return to Base” to the staff on the middle and lower decks.

The turmoil hadn’t yet settled.

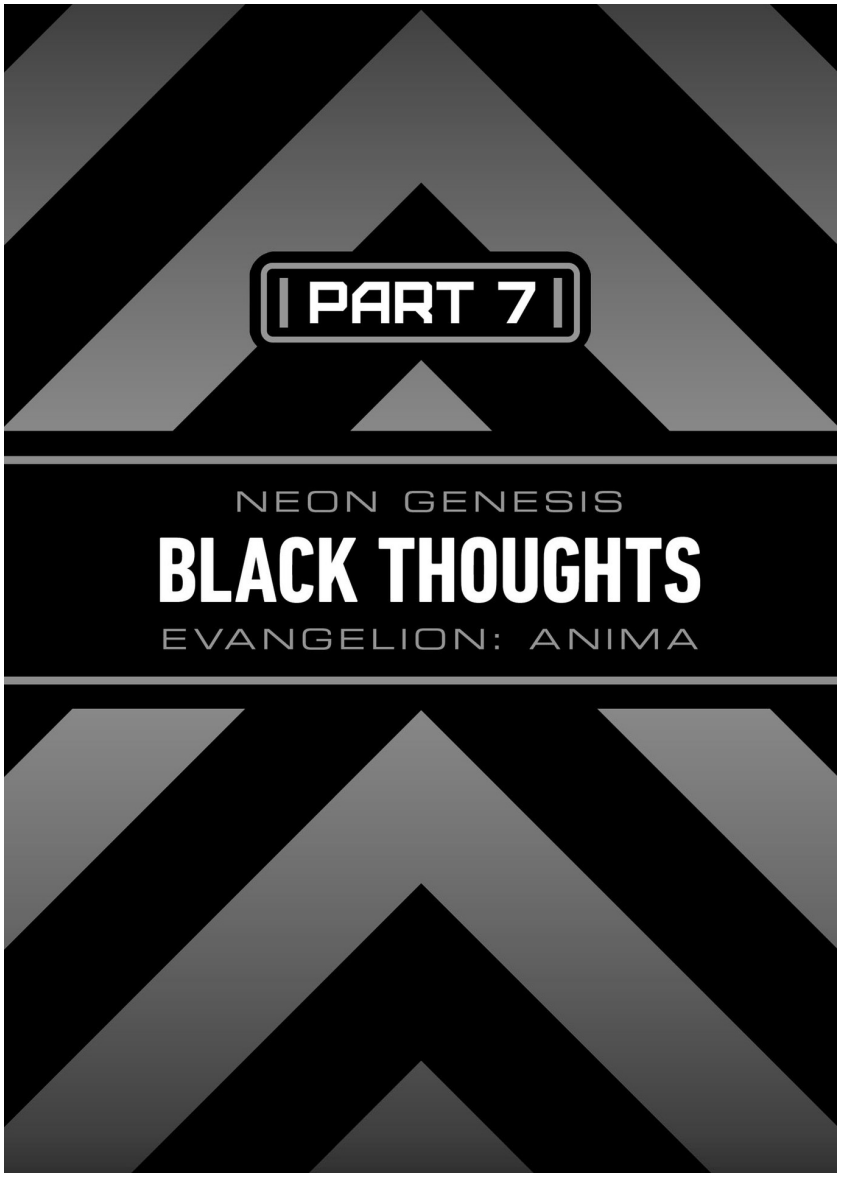
“I’m going to ask someone to step up,” Toji replied.

Hyuga blinked in confusion.

Toji muttered, “Though all I have to draw him out from retirement at this point is our ineptitude.”

Toji buttoned up his senior officer’s uniform, which he’d been leaving open—exposing his undershirt—even when in the command center.

“To be perfectly honest, we’ve shifted staff around more than this organization can handle. What we need now is someone who can keep Nerv Japan from breaking apart in the wind—someone who can ground us. Someone who can give us unfiltered advice.”


PART 7
NEON GENESIS
BLACK THOUGHTS
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 30:
Flight School

SUPER EVA FLEW LAPS around the Hakone caldera. Fires were still burning along the base of the southern mountains and in the fortified sectors of Tokyo-3.

"I'm not seeing those patterned trails from your flight like before," Maya said.

After the battle ended, Maya had disembarked from Super Eva. Rather than head for the command center to report, she went back to her lab to resume conducting the Eva's flight test. Super Eva intermittently emitted faint rainbow-colored bursts of light from its wings, leaving irregular ripples in the air like a child running through a puddle. Because the process involved creating a difference in air density with the A.T. Field and then flying through that gap, Shinji had imagined he'd have to carry some massive gravity-lens on his back, but that wasn't the case.

The test went swimmingly, but Shinji could hear Maya grumbling over the hydrospeaker.

The flight had essentially matched the anticipated design parameters, yet Maya said, < < I'm not seeing that amazing effect from before. > >

In battle, Super Eva had flown with unexpected agility and had left a fiercely bright trail that seemed to sear the sky. But Shinji couldn't reproduce it now, nor was he aware that he had acted any differently to create the effect before.

< < I wonder how we could reproduce it… > >

Inside time of a different scale, Shinji had made decisions and issued commands without moving a finger; and with abnormal speed, Super Eva had responded. The concept of controlling a machine by one's brain waves was a staple in science fiction—and in fact, Evangelions already had that functionality. Sensors within the entry plug could read the pilot's thoughts by measuring their brain waves. The control stick did nothing more but clarify the intended command. Shinji asked Maya if that process had simply

shortened, but the scientist flatly rejected the theory, saying that piloting by thought was not a particularly speedy process.

< < The human brain is structured to make decisions and actions only after hesitation. Even if you think you've made a snap decision, in the background your mind has already vacillated between yes and no many times. Thoughts, as a rule, take considerable time. > >

So then what was that? Shinji wondered.

< < Here's a thought. Because you and the Eva have evolved into a single body, we disabled the synchronizer, as we saw no need to enhance your synchronization rate. But maybe we should try using it again, with some adjustments. > >

The baseline synchronization rate between each pilot and their Eva peaked at age fourteen, after which it declined. Two years ago, Maya had improved the synchronizers by repurposing the parallel consciousness injection technology from the dummy plug system. Currently, every pilot relied on this assistance—aside from Shinji, who had become one with his Eva, and Ayanami Rei Six, who had been pulled early from the artificial womb to offset the timing of her peak synchronization.

No one knew what would happen as their ages continued to diverge from the peak period. Would they suddenly over-synchronize and be swallowed up by the core, becoming a ghost within the Eva? Or would the Eva reject them and destroy their minds? The only certainty was that no good future awaited the pilots, unless they stopped piloting altogether.

"I'm passing over Sengokuhara High School," Shinji reported.

Shinji's junior high class had been assembled from potential pilot recruits. After graduation, they were moved up to high school as a single cohort out of concern for information security, but the original intent behind their assembly had largely faded, and the purpose of the school for Tokyo-3 civilians and families of Nerv staff had shifted.

"Maya-san," Shinji asked, "How long should I keep flying?"

< < Oh, did you forget? You destroyed Super Eva's cage when you took off, and the supervisor of Cage One is absolutely refusing to take you in. There are too many irreplaceable things there—

including Unit Zero Type-F—to risk their destruction. > >

Hyuga interrupted. < < Command center to Super Eva. Pardon the interruption, Chief Ibuki. Shinji-kun, could you remove the magazine from the Powered 8? At our current alert level, you're breaking a number of treaties by carrying that loaded. We have no indication of further contact with any hostile forces. > > A pause. < < Well, not that our enemies ever give any indication before they attack… > >

"Super Eva to command center. Hyuga, I acknowledge."

The reduction of Earth's mass had caused the satellites to scatter. No one knew how many had retained their orbits, but the radar showed several unidentified objects above. From traditional aircraft to high-altitude stratospheric planes, the eyes of the world continued to place Evangelions under constant watch. This was only natural; Evangelions were the greatest destructive force humanity possessed. Matters had only been complicated by Eva-02's conversion to a Pegasus, and now by Super Eva's acquisition of wings. Nerv Japan couldn't afford to cause any more trouble.

Trouble? Shinji thought. *Trouble is all there is.*

Shinji already understood that Super Eva was still flying because of something more than Maya's tests. The chief scientist was working on finding accommodation for the giant, as the command center was likely still in turmoil. Between the surprise attack, Quatre's arrival, and the human salinization, casualties had been considerable.

But for Nerv as an organization, the abduction of Commander Misato was the greatest blow.

"Maya-san," Shinji teased, "you got out of your plugsuit so soon?"

< < Shinji-kun, > > Maya said, pausing for threatening effect, < < keep making fun of the adults and someone might mix hot sauce into your LCL. > >

Shinji was joking, but on the inside, he was panicking. Because of this recent incident, including Misato's abduction, he would likely be stuck on Earth even longer than he might have been otherwise. Once he gained his wings, he'd intended to search for Asuka, who'd gone missing on her voyage to the moon. Now he

wasn’t even sure which problem he should deal with first. Indecision and doubt had crept in.

“What is Toji saying?”

Chapter 31:
The Recluse

WHEN TOJI THOUGHT of a place in the mountains south of Kyoto, he imagined a tatami-matted tea room and a picturesque garden with a rhythmically clacking bamboo fountain. But the only part of reality that matched his imagination was Fuyutsuki's informal kimono.

I shouldn't have wasted my time going over reports on the plane.

Fuyutsuki had let his gray hair grow out, and he looked like he'd dwelled inside this old house, amid its mountains of books, far longer than Toji had been alive.

Except it's only been three years, Toji reminded himself.

The building was a white, Western-style affair with a hipped roof and white clapboard, and had once been a clubhouse owned by the university where Fuyutsuki used to teach. The only way the modest abode could have looked more like an old school building was if it had a weather instrument shelter standing in the yard.

But there was a little more to it than that. Nerv had remodeled the building to turn it into a secret safehouse. Though no alterations had been made to the exterior, the structure was now earthquake (and other disaster) resistant, and its power, heating, and water supplies could last through temporary shortages, of which there were many these days.

Fuyutsuki sat at his desk in front of the window, surrounded by well organized but overwhelming stacks of books on anthropology and religion. The man had turned his chair to face the acting deputy commander, who told him everything that had happened thus far and humbly requested he return to service.

Fuyutsuki Kozo had been a teacher and mentor to former commander Ikari Gendo. Three years ago, he'd worked as Gendo's second-in-command. Because he knew too much of the past, the Nerv information security department had effectively imprisoned him deep in the mountainside. To this day he remained under twenty-four-hour surveillance, complete with countermeasures

against third-party espionage. But the current commander, Misato, had afforded him a certain level of freedom as a personal favor.

But none of those efforts, either to restrict or enhance his freedom, changed much for Fuyutsuki. Judging from the state of the room, Fuyutsuki passed the time reading his vast book collection and organizing his research.

This guy's an academic by nature. If anything, his stint as Nerv's deputy commander was when his life jumped the rails like a runaway train.

I'm wasting my time here, Toji thought.

But Fuyutsuki said, "How long can you give me to get ready?"

Toji gaped and blurted out a reply. "Huh? Er, ah… I'm flying right back by an N_2 Flanker, but we've got a heavy VTOL aircraft on standby for you. You can simply let the pilot know whatever time works for you."

Yes! Toji tried to keep his celebration on the inside, but the excitement leaked out into his expression and gestures.

Fuyutsuki had imagined that Nerv might one day ask him to come back. But he'd expected the visit would come from Misato or Shinji. In that situation, he'd intended to firmly refuse. He would've had trouble believing that they truly needed him after all this time.

But instead it was this boy, Toji, who'd arrived on his doorstep. Fuyutsuki knew little about him, aside from the fact that he was the Fourth Child and the test pilot of Eva-03. From what the boy had said, over the past several weeks that he'd served as Katsuragi's second, Nerv had managed to maintain control of the situation, at least, as best as could be expected.

The boy's calm, competent demeanor took Fuyutsuki by surprise, and his resistance—whether borne of hesitation or pride—vanished. Before he was even aware of this change of heart, he found himself accepting the request. He wanted to see what had become of the children he knew three years ago.

Fuyutsuki was starting to see why Katsuragi had entrusted the role of second-in-command to this young man. Toji had been a

simple go-between but one whose background had already been thoroughly checked. And he wouldn't have been of any use without access to important information and the ability to interface between different departments.

Individuals talented only in their respective fields didn't often operate well as a single group. There were, of course, exceptions, but on the whole, such people tended to be poor collaborators. For Fuyutsuki, that truth had been brought home three years ago.

This boy, he realized, *has the social aptitude to connect people.*

Fuyutsuki felt burdened by the debt he'd left behind. But when Gendo was swallowed up by the Chronostatic Sphere, Fuyutsuki had simply desired to be free of it all.

Can this young man, and all the people of Nerv, overcome the sins that Ikari and I committed?

He was interested in learning the answer.

Chapter 32:
Armaros

ASUKA WAS STARTLED AWAKE by the sound of birds flapping their wings. Apparently, she'd dozed off while walking Eva-02 Allegorica. She looked around at the cockpit's displays. She was still on the surface of the moon.

"Was I dreaming?"

The moon had continued its mystifying expansion and was now nearly 1.4 times its original diameter. The pull of the moon's gravity had strengthened accordingly, and for reasons Asuka didn't understand, the heated gas spewing from its subsurface had begun to form a weak atmosphere.

Due to the influence of Earth's gravity, the moon's heavier side had always remained pointed toward the Earth, much like the weighted bottom of a daruma doll kept the roly-poly object upright. From the moon, the Earth had remained in roughly the same part of the sky and could be used as a point of reference to locate oneself even if the moon's topography changed. But the crust was now undergoing such a tremendous upheaval that the daruma doll might have tipped over freely. Under these conditions, Asuka couldn't determine her exact location, but she thought she'd entered into the Sea of Fertility and was moving toward the Sea of Crises.

When the Lance of Longinus fell to the moon, the relic had landed in the Sea of Crises. That was where Armaros had pounded the moon's surface with the lance and issued its judgment to the Earth. Asuka wanted to check the location out. She'd decided to go on foot, rather than leaping on a direct, ballistic path, because she didn't like the idea of suddenly stumbling upon the black giant.

Asuka looked around to make sure nothing was amiss.

Wait, something is.

"I'm picking up strange vibrations in the ground."

The vibrations were spreading out from a point behind her—from where she'd come. It wasn't just her Allegorica's feet picking

them up, either; the seismographs on the sensor network she'd spread behind her confirmed the pattern. But the data they sent seemed wrong.

"The hypocenter is too large. What could that mean?"

These were surface-level vibrations, which Asuka had been watching for. Typically, vibrations like that would indicate something like a landslide or a mountain collapsing, and if not that, then something active on the surface—in other words, an enemy—but nothing matched this data.

"Calculate a jump trajectory," Asuka instructed the AI. "Lock on to my sight line."

She fixed her gaze on the near side of a mountain range called Montes Pyrenaeus, which was located along the route she'd walked. The AI began arraying the gravitons along the diamond slits in the Allegorica wings.

"Mark!" she said, and the Pegasus's four legs added their power to the wings' graviton floaters. She leaped off the moon's surface and into the lunar sky.

"Ever since I came up here, nothing has gone as expected. It's starting to get on my nerves."

Eva-02 was about to reach the peak of its trajectory and enter free fall, when—

"What?!"

Beyond the far side of the mountain range, a new celestial object had raised its round head and climbed into the sky.

"Impossible!"

Asuka tilted her control stick, stopping her leap and calling on the Allegorica's thrusters to bring her straight down. By dropping altitude, she put the mountains between her and what she'd seen. Using the graviton floaters, she switched to a hovering flight to approach the ridgeline.

"What was that?"

She reached the ridgeline and cautiously poked her head up.

There it was—an ascending black celestial body with a red-hot core that glowed through the cracks of its surface.

Asuka began to panic, but a sudden wave of apprehension from her Eva brought her back to herself.

Looking closer, she realized that the gigantic black sphere was rising, dome-like, from the surface of a vast plain of basalt called the Sea of Nectar. When she'd first seen the object over the mountains, she'd mistakenly thought a foreign celestial body had suddenly fallen toward the moon, but whatever the true explanation, it was equally astounding—because when she'd passed this way before, there'd been no such sphere.

These were Asuka's observations, but they weren't what had brought her back to her senses. A tiny speck of a black figure stood on the charred apex of the rising sphere.

"He's here… He's here… He's here."

The black giant, Armaros.

Here was the enemy who'd unwound the helix of the Lance of Longinus into a single line of light and was using that power to strangle the Earth—the entity that had urged humanity to clear the stage for the next Instrumentality Project.

Asuka zoomed in the view from her Eva's four eyes. The image of the figure wavered through the hot gas emitted by the sphere. Eva-02 was practically trembling, withering before Armaros' presence. Asuka could feel it, too—this was an opponent of unfathomable strength. She felt her body begin to shake, but she took deep breaths of the LCL to remain steady.

Armaros knelt on the smoldering sphere, his right hand on the burning surface, and seemed to be pulling the mass—vastly larger than the giant himself—up and out from the lunar surface.

There's no mistaking it. Armaros really is pulling all of that up from the ground. But…

"Why am I only detecting surface vibrations?"

If that rock is being pulled up from the inside of the moon, then shouldn't I be sensing vibrations from deep underground?

But the black and red sphere kept rising. Meanwhile, the seismic data suggested that the mass *wasn't* coming from underground but rather sprouting directly out of the moon's surface, magically, as if from a two-dimensional plane.

Assuming the entire body formed a sphere, Asuka tried to estimate its full size based on the visible curvature.

That's a diameter of 220 to 240 kilometers!

"Incredible…"

A sphere with 1/14th the moon's average diameter was coming up from the surface.

If Asuka's calculations were right, then the size of the sphere at its widest point would reach where she was standing. The mountain range was going to collapse under her feet.

Asuka began a hasty retreat. She jumped as low as she could, but the apex of the sphere was continuing to ascend—already cresting higher than the 2,200-meter elevation of the mountains. She'd soon run out of cover.

The sphere's widest intersection emerged from the mountain range like a gigantic 3D hologram. If Asuka's sensors were right, the object wasn't simply an orb of burning rock but an object of unusually high pressure and density. It was a wonder the sphere didn't break apart under its own pressure; more confusing was the lack of change in the moon's gravity.

"Is this an illusion?"

Whatever her doubts, she kept running. She could feel strongly the sphere's radiating heat through the Eva's armor. No longer worried about being spotted, she ignited the Eva's thrusters at full power and escaped eastward.

Beyond the mountains to Asuka's back, the sphere emerged in full. Armaros changed his stance atop the globe and placed both hands on its surface, almost as though the black giant were about to start pushing. And then—

The gravimeter's graphic indicator swung wildly.

As if suddenly given true form and mass, the 240-kilometer-wide body of rock—large enough to be a moon in its own right—slammed into the moon's surface. In the brief moment before the seismograph needles broke on Asuka's sensors, they captured a snapshot of the seismic waves piercing deep beneath the moon's crust. Just as Asuka had predicted, the mountain range named after the Pyrenees collapsed.

Oddly, the unnatural impact resulted in less airborne debris than its scale would have suggested. As the ground heaved, the rock beneath the surface melted in a radius far wider than the plane of impact. Five-kilometer tall, black-crested waves of molten rock veined with orange chased after Asuka.

For a moment, Eva-02 Allegorica was overtaken and enveloped by the fast-moving regolith, but the Eva continued to accelerate away from the silent, uniformly spreading cloud.

"None of this makes any damn sense!" Asuka fumed.

But then she remembered the hot, ripple-shaped cracks she'd seen on the moon's surface during her initial entry.

"Don't tell me Armaros has been doing this same thing over and over!"

The increase of the moon's mass! The deviation of its orbit!

It didn't appear as though the impact was going to split the moon apart, but its orbit would surely be thrown even more off-balance.

"Come on! The Earth is getting smaller and smaller, and Armaros decides to make the moon *bigger* ? What's that about?!"

As soon as she said it, Asuka realized that the two phenomena were connected.

"No," she whispered.

When Asuka had departed the Earth, the planet was beset by frequent, powerful earthquakes, and its diameter was mysteriously shrinking. It wasn't entirely a mystery—the Lance of Longinus was strangling the Earth from an altitude of 20,000 kilometers and elongating itself on its way to becoming a complete ring. Though the mechanism wasn't understood, the planet's inner material was vanishing on a tremendous scale.

But where was all that matter going?

Here.

She shook her head fiercely. If not for the LCL, a motion like that in low gravity risked spinal damage. But she couldn't help it.

"No. No, no. I can't believe it! It just can't be. There isn't—"

She was too terrified to take that thought any further. Just

then, an urgent message came from her scouting satellites, and she focused her attention on the message.

The transmission contained two components—a low fuel warning for the satellites' orbital correction propellant and a log containing a radio signal received from the other side of the moon.

"And it's flagged as a distress signal?"

According to the AI's analysis, it was.

"What is it?"

The message was on a loop, and half was encrypted. The emotionless appeal came across as perfunctory. Asuka figured that some nation had sent up a lunar exploration drone or something like that. But still, on this rock so far from home, the message was like hearing from a friend.

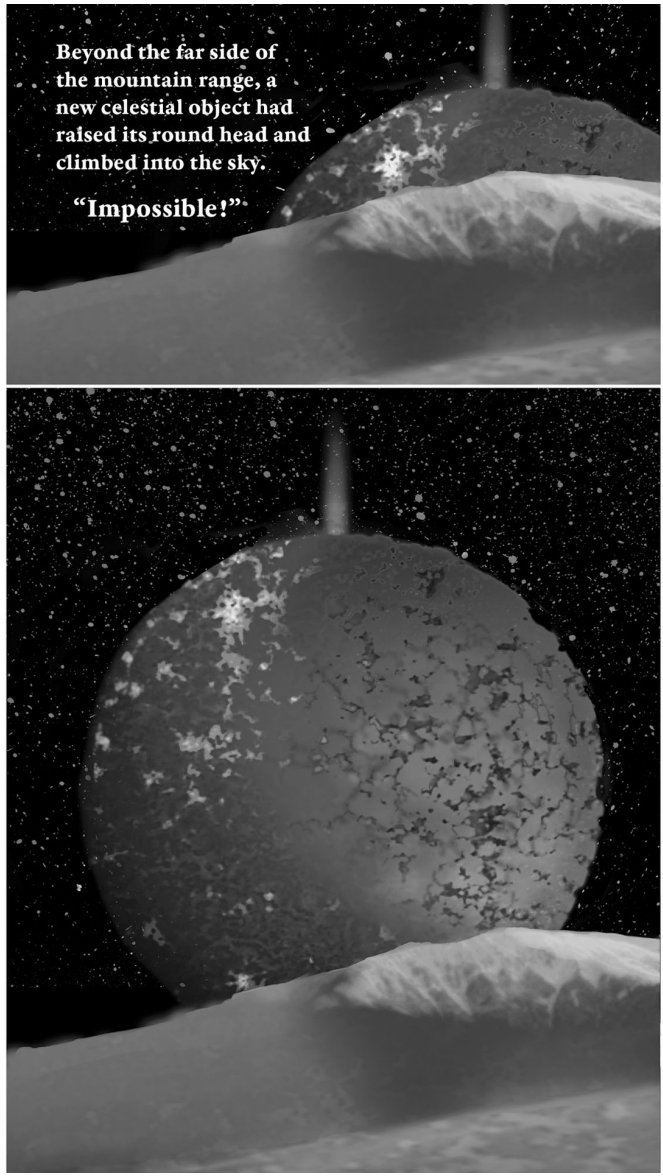
Luckily, Armaros was far behind her now and wasn't pursuing her. Had the giant not noticed her? Or had it chosen to ignore her?

As Asuka's leap reached its apex, all she could see was the top of the regolith cloud as it hung in the air. Everything else was hidden beyond the horizon. Nothing followed her, aside from an electromagnetic disruption and the seismic waves that crawled along the surface.

I feel defeated .

"I'd better go."

Asuka spurred herself onward, so as not to be tempted to look back at the celestial show behind her. Instead, she fled from Armaros without attempting a single attack.


Beyond the far side of the mountain range, a new celestial object had raised its round head and climbed into the sky.
“Impossible!”

Chapter 33:
The Return

HAVING CHOPPED OFF his long hair and put on his senior officer's uniform, Fuyutsuki arrived at the Nerv Japan command center looking exactly as he had three years before.

Hyuga, Aoba, and the other longtime staff ran over to the returning officer.

He had come to take up his former role as deputy commander, ready to assume full control of the situation in place of Commander Katsuragi, who had been abducted by the traitorous Ayanami Quatre—or at least, that's what the gathered personnel assumed. When Fuyutsuki greeted them and announced that he intended to be Acting Deputy Commander Suzuhara's aide, he caused quite a stir.

Fuyutsuki currently held no rank or title within the organization, and Misato, the person with the highest authority—the only one with the authority to make such an appointment—was gone. Whatever improbable events had left Toji as the highest-ranking officer, he couldn't magically summon a superior at will. On paper, Fuyutsuki's announcement made sense. But that didn't mean it *felt* right to the clamoring personnel.

Toji was only just now stepping onto the elevator to the command center, having been instructed by Fuyutsuki to delay, because "Everyone will be asking me a thousand questions."

Already inside the cabin, Rei Six gave him an over-the-top salute and said, "Acting Deputy Commander, Sir!"

Rei Trois was with her.

"Hey there, Zashiki-wara *six* ," Toji replied, combining her name with that of a mischievous, childlike poltergeist. "And Ayanami Eight."

As the doors began to close, a voice whined, "Hey! Wait for me."

Shinji spilled into the elevator. The pilot had finally been let out of his Eva.

“Hey, nice work out there,” Toji said.

“Hiya, Ikari!” said Six.

“Hey, everyone. So, what’s happening with Misato-san?”

“Nothin’ new to report,” Toji replied.

Fuyutsuki had already explained to Toji his intention to act as the teenager’s aide, but in truth, Toji wished the more knowledgeable and experienced elder would take the reins. Fuyutsuki had urged him to never speak that thought aloud, so Toji was keeping it locked up tightly inside.

Meanwhile, Fuyutsuki was speaking to the command center crew. “Do you want to talk about the future? Do you want to talk about the past?”

His voice was by no means loud, but the crowd had gathered around him in attentive silence, and his words carried throughout the room.

When the elevator doors opened, Shinji was the first to speak.

“Fuyutsuki-sensei!”

Fuyutsuki turned and said, with a started look, “Yui-kun?”

“What?” Shinji was confused. Now that he’d matured into a young man, nobody ever said he looked like his mother anymore. He glanced at Ayanami Trois, thinking Fuyutsuki must have reacted to seeing her. On the genetic level, Ayanami *was* Yui. But no, Shinji realized, the senior officer’s surprise was aimed at him. His expression softened.

“Hello, Shinji-kun.”

“It’s been a while, Fuyutsuki-sensei.”

Had it? The pace of time’s passing changed with age. When an adult said to a child, “Wait until tomorrow,” it felt impossibly far away, while a year was so distant as to escape all measure.

At Fuyutsuki’s age, three years felt more like half a year. But he knew from experience that young people, in their teens and twenties, could appear to undergo explosive growth. That kind of

rapid change was met with surprise and also fear.

Fuyutsuki had feared that for Shinji, change would lead the boy down the same path Gendo had taken. But no matter what changes adulthood brought to the boy, Fuyutsuki worried he would always see Gendo when he looked at Shinji—which was why he wouldn't have been able to return to Nerv had Shinji been the one to ask him.

But today, what Fuyutsuki saw in Shinji was Yui, softly smiling just before she dissolved into the Eva during the contact experiment, when she discovered that creating the universe and bearing a child were one and the same.

He saw the other side, Fuyutsuki realized.

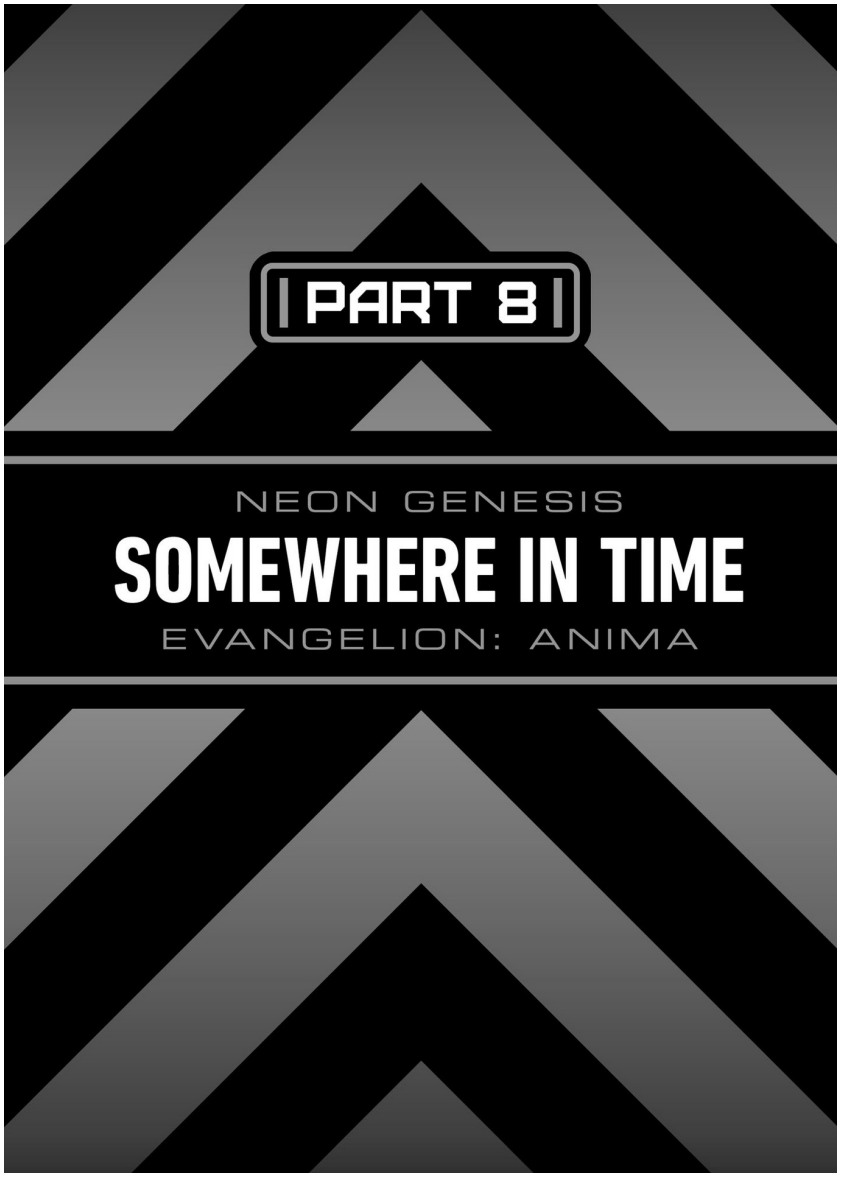
Then it happened.

"This is an emergency!" a young technician shouted from the lower deck. All the middle deck staff had left their stations to gather around Fuyutsuki and hadn't responded to the message.

An urgent communication had arrived from an intelligence officer in the field—Rei Quatre's mutant Eva-0.0 had appeared in the Mediterranean Sea. Cyprus.

< < I know I told you to send an emergency evac, but could someone tell me what the hell Commander Katsuragi is doing here with Quatre's Eva? > >

The call had come from Kensuke.


PART 8
NEON GENESIS
SOMEWHERE IN TIME
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 34:
Window to the Moon

ASUKA FOUND the source of the distress signal. On the far side of the moon, lying sideways, half-buried in the regolith, a vehicle greeted Eva-02 Allegorica with orange blinking hazard lights.

"You certainly don't look like any lunar rover I've ever seen," Asuka said.

The vehicle was painted in drab greens and browns, the same earth tones that seemed to come back into fashion every several years. If she had to identify the vehicle, she'd say it was an armored military truck—something that belonged on Earth, not the moon.

"For one thing, you've got side view mirrors and hazard lights… And what's that on top, an antenna? Radar? Some kind of reflective plate?"

Asuka had never seen one before, so she didn't know it was a quantum wave mirror. The truck had belonged to the convoy in Hokkaido that had brought the supposedly invincible Super Eva to its knees by linking with Hikari's Eva Euro-II to create a gravitational distortion.

In their fight, a rift in space had opened between the two giants. Before the rift closed, several vehicles and people had been swallowed by it and taken to the other side.

But Asuka didn't know any of this. All she could wonder was, *What is something from Earth doing on the surface of the moon?*

The truck had been deposited on the far side of the moon—a mysterious place where the ground formed parallel ripples, like crashing waves.

"I'm seeing some kind of magnetic field ahead. Is that what's causing this pattern?"

The field lines were filtering out the cosmic rays that bombarded the moon; the expanse of basalt was black where it had

been burned by the rays and gray where it was less-thoroughly cooked, like a photo negative.

"Is there anyone inside?" Asuka asked.

She assumed there would be, but she didn't put on her spacesuit to check. She'd considered it, but just as she was about to exit the Eva, she felt a premonition of danger so strong that a chill ran down her back. She didn't have any rational basis for changing her mind, but the very universe was being remade, and sometimes she felt like she was living in a myth. In a myth, ill omens were not to be ignored.

Proof came quickly. She looked inside the armored truck with a fiberscope. On the seats were crumpled uniforms and a white powdery substance spilling out of them.

"Salt."

From northern Africa, through Europe, and all the way to Russia, 1.9 million people had turned into salt, and Asuka made the mental connection immediately. But why here? Why had these soldiers been turned into salt this far from home? She knelt the Allegorica's four legs down and used both arms—the Eva's left had halfway recovered—to gently lift the toppled truck, as if it were a sleeping child. She set the vehicle upright.

Her giant hands and fingers had deformed the outside of the truck, and she didn't recognize any of the markings, but through the camera, she'd been able to read the labels on the instrument panels and interior surfaces, because they were in her mother tongue.

"You came from Germany."

She searched for something she could take back with her but found nothing of significance, so once she finished taking pictures, she steered Eva-02 Allegorica in the direction of the magnetic field's source and started walking across the striped ground.

She'd already accomplished what she'd come here for, and she didn't think the field originated from anything more than a magnetic anomaly. Normally, she would have ignored it. But the vehicle had been pointing in that same direction, and that was reason enough to go.

Chapter 35:
The Person Inside

TOKYO-3 HAD SOMEHOW SURVIVED the assault by three winged Angel Carriers. The night had grown late, and the submerged buildings rose back up among the wreckage and offered their light. A fleet of heavy vehicles rumbled as the repair and resupply of the fortified districts continued.

But their pace left much to be desired. The widespread catastrophes had wreaked havoc across all borders. The death toll from earthquakes and tsunamis caused by the reduction in the Earth's circumference had long since surpassed the Lance of Longinus's destruction, and the total number of victims was incalculable. The governments of the world and their citizens were struggling to respond. Nerv Japan had so far managed to keep up with their supplies and maintenance through sheer force, but signs already indicated that these days were numbered. Toji had presumed that Fuyutsuki's help would make life easier for him, but the resupply efforts after this most recent battle had him running around frantically.

Given the circumstances, repairs to Cage Two were put on hold.

The cage had been destroyed by Super Eva's unplanned flight and was designated off-limits. No one was supposed to be there. But in the darkness—

THRUM!

THRUM!

A loud heartbeat echoed through the ruined chamber, and a light flickered among the rubble. With a flashlight in hand, Shinji jumped from one fallen chunk of reinforced wall to another.

This light fell upon an external unit that belonged to Super Eva, and when Shinji saw that the equipment had been pinned under a collapsed, multi-tier metal frame, Super Eva's giant hand reached out from the shadows at his back.

A voice spoke. “What are you doing, Ikari-kun?”

Shinji yelped. His surprise carried over to Super Eva, and the frame slipped from the giant’s fingers. Amid the thunderous crash, Shinji turned to the source of the voice. There, poised at the top of a munitions tree—an Evangelion weapons supply tower, this one loaded with magazines for a Powered 8—Ayanami was looking down at him.

“Trois?! What are you doing up there? That’s dangerous!”

The tall bundle of metal released a shrill, ominous groan, and Shinji extended Super Eva’s arm, placing its open hand before her feet.

“That’s dangerous, too,” she said but quickly leaped onto Super Eva’s hand.

“Ah! You’ve gotta at least look before you leap!”

“Oh?”

Super Eva’s hand lowered her eighty meters through the darkness, and she bounded onto the top of the same precarious piece of rubble Shinji had climbed. He stumbled, and Ayanami caught him by the waist. Shinji wondered how she could possibly maintain such perfect balance in the dim glow of a single flashlight.

“Well, thanks,” Shinji said. “At least you helped me find the tree with the spare ammo.”

“I had a hunch you were planning to make a break for it. You are, aren’t you?”

She didn’t quite make him laugh, but her casual, lighthearted phrasing suggested that this Ayanami was thinking like Cinq.

Toji said that Ayanami Rei Trois’ body hadn’t been completely taken over by Cinq and that Trois’ mind was still alive in there, even if she didn’t assert herself. Shinji wondered if that was true.

“I’m only sneaking around because no one else was going to let me in here,” Shinji said, “let alone search for salvage. Everyone else is too busy fixing the other facilities.”

“You know that moving Super Eva from its hangar is going to cause quite a stir. And…I notice you didn’t deny you’re leaving.”

“If I don’t hurry, I won’t make it on time.”

“You’re worried about Soryu, aren’t you?” Ayanami asked.

“Asuka puts on a brave face, but she’s the lonesome type.”

Rei Trois would have called her Asuka, not Soryu. She’d made a point of doing that to train Asuka to call her Rei. Cinq was the one who’d called her Soryu. On the surface, Cinq was sociable, but she didn’t let others in past a certain distance. The fugitive Quatre was the only one who still called Asuka “the Second Child.”

“Oh, er,” Shinji stammered. “Don’t tell Asuka I said that. She’d be seriously pissed.”

“I won’t.”

Ayanami looked up at him. This close, he could feel her warmth.

Flustered, he said, “Ayanami, you’re too close!”

Her expression abruptly went blank, and she said, “Look at me.”

“Huh?”

“I’m not your mother.”

“I…I know that!”

“You don’t.”

“I do.”

“That’s a lie,” Ayanami said, looking down. When she looked back up, she was smiling again. “Sorry, did I make you uncomfortable?”

Shinji made a noncommittal sound.

That was Cinq now, defusing the tension. But who had she been leading up to that?

Chapter 36:
Misato's Voyage

BY APPROPRIATING THE WINGS from the Angel Carrier Shinji had defeated, Quatre's Eva-0.0 had at last joined the ranks of the flying. The giant's runaway mutations were spiraling out of control.

When Unit Quatre slipped through the window in space that opened to the south of Tokyo-3, it still held Misato imprisoned in its left hand. The commander shuddered with fear as the air suddenly changed around her. Rather than appear directly at their destination, they had entered a pocket of isolated space where the Eva was jostled up and down like a twig in a river.

The dislocation was nearly instantaneous—to describe the journey as teleportation wouldn't have been a stretch—but Misato thought she caught glimpses of something passing them in the darkness, as if they were rushing though a complex tunnel system that split like the roots of a tree.

Misato had assumed that Evas possessing a Q.R. Signum could leap from place to place at will, but now she wondered if the travel was governed by some kind of intermediary system or a framework.

FWOOM!

Air rushed away, displaced by the mutant Eva-0.0's arrival amid a hilly countryside.

Where have we gone?

The sun, which had been setting over Tokyo-3, was now high in the sky, and the air was dry. Misato glanced at her watch—the GPS and Galileo satellites had been thrown out of orbit by the changing of Earth's gravity, but the device picked up, of all things, three signals from Europe, Russia, and West Asia.

The Eva began walking.

The birds had gone from this part of the world as well. In their absence, insects had proliferated, and clouds of bugs leaped up from the grass with each of the Eva's giant footsteps.

“Where are we?” Misato asked.

“Cyprus,” replied Ayanami Rei Quatre from atop the Eva’s head.

This was where Kaji had become Seele.

“Impossible,” Misato said.

She knew very little remained truly impossible, but…what? Was she supposed to casually say, *“Oh, is that so?”*

Despite everything that had happened, this was too much to process on the spot. But as Misato looked all around, she saw two helicopters that had crossed over the mountains on her left only to abruptly change course, and a voice came from within herself.

Think, it said. *Use your head* .

She didn’t see any obvious landmarks. These remote hills were dry and offered little in the way of green, the insects having ravaged the flora. On a hill up ahead stood stone ruins, beside which a smoke grenade smoldered, sending green clouds billowing across the ground. Someone wanted to be found.

But who? she wondered. *If this is Cyprus, then…*

The weak southerly wind…is that from the sea? Is the Mediterranean on the other side of those mountains? Because the American and European UN peacekeeping fleet is anchored there. Were those UN helicopters?

For the past few days, Misato had completely abandoned her duty. She had suffered a tremendous shock when she learned that Chairman Kiel’s parting gift had wiped out Kaji’s conscious self, leaving his body behind. And now she was here, having let herself be captured by the fugitive Rei Quatre.

Get ahold of yourself! she told herself. *Your time off ends now.*

A surprised voice called out from the ruins. “Commander Katsuragi?”

“Aida-kun! Tell Hakone what’s happening at once!”

So, Quatre had been telling the truth. The mutant Eva-0.0 had used the mysterious power of the Armaros Q.R. Signum to travel some nine thousand kilometers in an instant.

Aida Kensuke appeared from behind the ruins, and another man emerged after him. Misato prepared herself. *I'm going to see him.*

The island of Cyprus floated in the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, where the surrounding regions had been a source of political strife since antiquity. European and American fleets acting as UN monitors had been stationed in the waters south of the island. But now the fleets were there under rather different circumstances—in response to a phrase included in Armaros' proclamation, "the Ark."

As the nations of the world slid toward destruction, each had become desperate in their search for the Ark. Many focused their search on this region, rich in links to religious and mythological arks thought to offer salvation to a select few.

Newfound geopolitical tensions arose as the changes in the Earth's geography caused the level of the Black Sea to drop, and Russia's Black Sea Fleet, along with other naval ships, crossed the Bosporus. Most of the regional attention should have been focused there, and yet—

"We've held off against several attacks," Aida said. "I think word has gotten out that Kaji-san has become Seele. The team went out in search of a vehicle."

Quatre interrupted, "Cover your ears!"

One moment, there came a high-pitched sound from a small turbine, the next, Unit Quatre was struck by an explosion.

A cruise missile had flown in low from the south and detonated against the power shield generated by Unit Quatre's Q.R. Signum. And then another. The noise was tremendous, even inside a protective barrier stronger than an Eva's A.T. Field.

"What's happening?!" Misato shouted.

The first explosion had caused the group's ears to ring; after the second, they could only communicate through yells.

"The UN found us!" Aida answered. "Commander! Why are you here with Quatre?"

Why indeed. The commander's abduction by the fugitive clone had, as a matter of course, been kept under wraps, and Kensuke had

no way of knowing. *Where do I begin?*

Unit Quatre's armor, distorted by mutations, creaked and groaned as the Eva moved into action.

Kensuke protested, "This thing has been designated a hostile to every military on the planet. The moment you're found, of course they're going to—"

His complaint disappeared into the shock wave as the mutant Eva-0.0 split the western sky with its gamma-ray laser cannon.

What's the Eva attacking? Misato wondered.

She thought she saw an object glimmering far away in the sky. The object seemed to change course ever so slightly, and the light disappeared to the south, past the mountains and into the distance, where the UN fleet was on patrol. In the next instant, a bright light flashed, scattering the clouds over a wide area.

After a delay came the rumble of the shock wave, its power greatly reduced over the distance. A massive mushroom cloud formed in the southern sky.

"My God!" Kensuke said. "What the hell is that?!"

The shock wave came in several ripples as different portions of it interacted with the topography. Then they were gone, and stillness returned. The only sound was the creaking of metal as the outer plates of Eva-0.0's laser cannon expanded from the weapon's heat.

Unit Quatre lowered Misato to the ground and released her, and the commander gazed out at the strange cloud.

"That was the Iphiclus Javelin," Misato said, "an N_2 warhead launched by a ballistic missile."

The warhead's anti-Angel shielding had backfired. If the missile had been equipped with a conventional exterior, the laser would have simply dropped it from the sky.

"This is bad," Kensuke said. "This is really bad."

Following the book, the UN Mediterranean fleet had attempted to bury Quatre's Eva with the established tool for

annihilating the Angels—an N_2 warhead. But Quatre must have noticed the attack before the missile entered the final guidance stage.

Behind the deeply rattled Kensuke, the other man was chuckling. Misato looked at him.

He laughed again and said, “What’s with the long face, Commander of Nerv Japan Katsuragi Misato?”

He was Kaji Ryoji, the vessel who had become Seele after Chairman Kiel’s memento hijacked his mind and body.

He looked and spoke like Kaji, except for the way he called Misato by her full name, and she immediately noticed a different spark in his eyes.

This is what you get, Misato thought, *when you insist on acting flippant and place your hands on something clearly dangerous.* In that moment, her overwhelming sadness was surpassed by a growing anger.

“Kaji-kun…” she said, searching for the words.

But Kensuke interrupted her. “Misato-san, Kaji-san is gone,” he said sympathetically.

It was then that Misato finally became conscious of the anger she felt toward this person who had been Kaji. The emotion surprised her.

The average person might have allowed themselves to fall into despair. Instead, Misato said, “But you’re not Kiel Lorenz either, right? You took in Kaji Ryoji’s knowledge, too.”

“That’s right,” the man said.

Misato adopted an accusatory tone. “Then you won’t have any problem with me calling you Kaji-kun, will you?”

Kensuke wasn’t sure that was how it worked.

“You’re such an idiot, Kaji-kun!” Misato said, refusing to accept that Kaji was entirely gone. Then she asked, “As…as Seele, what are your intentions for the world now?”

In the distant sky behind the man’s back, air heated by the

tremendous energy of the N_2 explosion continued to rise in a giant mushroom cloud. The cloud had crossed the troposphere and was now entering the stratosphere. The sea below was hidden by the mountains, but the situation there was likely unimaginably terrible. If the European and American fleets had been tightly packed together, the losses could be staggering.

"That's what I want to know," the man said. "The Instrumentality Project has failed on this world. I don't know why I've been forced to stay." An odd, black spark flickered behind the man's eyes—once Kaji's eyes. "I don't know why I've been detained here when all that was left for me to do was proceed to the next trial."

Kensuke cut in. "What happened to you with that visor…that was an unforeseeable accident."

"You don't really believe that, do you, Aida Kensuke? Kaji Ryoji realized that this was about to happen to you, and so he went first, to beat you to the punch."

Misato let out an exasperated sigh. "I thought as much. Beat him to the punch, you say? Well, I say you acted without thinking of the consequences."

Thunderheads rolled in around the rising mushroom cloud, and lightning flashed.

This is no time for that bickering, Kensuke thought. *Do these two not understand the situation we're in? And if they do, then what an unrelenting, unforgiving pair they are. One of them could die and the other still wouldn't stop arguing.*

The clouds summoned more clouds, and fat raindrops began to fall.

Misato cut to the crux of the matter. "Tell me, as Seele, what does Armaros want to do with this world?"

Surprisingly, the man answered. "He doesn't want to do anything. He doesn't have a consciousness. But you could've found that out by asking the ones who have heard his voice."

"What?! What do you mean?" said Ayanami Rei Quatre, standing on the shoulder of her kneeling Eva.

Kaji looked up toward her. "You must be one of Ikari Gendo's

toys. Ah, that's right, you and the other ones have been asking that artificial vessel for answers. Wasted effort, if you ask me, when anyone can hear him if they feel like it."

Quatre seemed to take offense at that. It wasn't often that an Ayanami let that emotion show. But the Kaji-vessel continued, unperturbed.

"That black giant has no free will. He has intelligence, but it's nothing more than a safety mechanism to ensure the advancement of the Instrumentality Project."

Misato wavered. Nerv Japan had believed Armaros the bringer of—and mastermind behind—the present calamity.

"I'll tell you now," the man said, "trying to find the true enemy is a waste of time. There's no one. No one is watching any of us. Maybe at one point someone was, but if so, they've vanished, or were destroyed, or went away."

This knowledge wouldn't likely change Nerv Japan's operations or their defensive strategy and response. But Misato and Kensuke both felt demoralized. They'd been able to fight because they had an enemy. That wasn't a bad thing or a good thing; it was simply the truth.

The Kaji-vessel continued. "All this time we've asked, 'God, are you there?' But Armaros has said that God is absent. The post is vacant. Interregnum. And our impresario's absence didn't begin with the Instrumentality Project's failure, in case you're wondering."

"Then…what is Armaros doing with the Evas?" Misato asked.

"What's left behind is the homework."

"The Human Instrumentality Project," Misato said.

"Right. I don't know if it's just our punishment, but every time humanity fails the project, the same problem is placed in front of us again. And we repeat the assignment, over and over and over. The only way to escape is to fulfill the project."

All Misato could say was, "What…"

Does that mean that the goal isn't what we gain from the project but the mere act of completing it? Was it not an outline for humanity to

take the next step?

"In a past world, many ages ago," the man said, "we were commanded to build an Ark that gave us access to a small portion of their techniques. With those techniques, we can cross time and form ourselves anew in the next world."

"And that's Seele," Misato said.

And the name of the first was Noah. When Kaji put on Kiel Lorenz's visor and transformed into Seele, Kensuke had gotten some of this information out of him. But when Kensuke kept asking questions, the answers started to sound like vile fairy tales.

"Humanity will always make the same mistakes. We still haven't gotten the right answer, but by being in control, we can at least keep from making the same mistake twice."

"You're telling us an awful lot," Misato remarked. "Is that because this world is closing up shop? Is someone going to come over the speaker and tell us to bring all final purchases to the front?"

"You all will be erased shortly. Armaros will prepare something truly terrifying. It doesn't matter what you know; you don't have time to do anything about it."

"You don't know everything!"

The Kaji vessel laughed. "That's certainly true." The man spoke just like Kaji had, with a dry, matter-of-fact irony. But through his voice, and without any concern, Seele described a cruel blueprint for the future.

The Kaji-vessel looked up at the northwestern sky.

"The battle resumes. The silent prisoner has arrived."

The clouds broke in the far distance, letting in slanted rays. Along with the light came a white-winged giant leading European aircraft.

After suffering heavy losses at sea, the fleet had called in reinforcements. In the sky above the battlefield, Eva Euro-II appeared, wielding a positron rifle.

Chapter 37:
Lunar Mirage

ASUKA THOUGHT she heard Hikari singing.

On the far side of the moon, near the source of the magnetic anomaly, she brought Eva-02 Allegorica to a stop. Ahead, the ground swelled into a rise followed by a sudden drop, as if the surface had been split open. The lunar crust in this area hadn't sustained as many extreme changes as other parts of the moon, but now that the satellite had swollen to 1.4 times its original diameter, very few places remained unperturbed. Case in point—the great cleft in the ground here.

And within…

Asuka and Eva-02 both reflexively raised their hands to cover their eyes—the Eva acting independently but in unison with its pilot. *Something* inside the giant rift was refusing their approach.

Asuka felt like she was being buffeted by a strong wind, to the point where she thought—falsely—that the flow of her entry plug's LCL had quickened.

"Wh-what is this?"

Forcing reason to overcome instinct, Asuka opened her eyes and looked out through the gaps between her fingers.

"A structure…made of glass? Is that a building?"

The structure was transparent and partially buried in the lunar soil, and it was impossible to tell how far below the surface it went, or the shape it took. Though the mysterious force tried to keep Asuka's eyes away, the blueness of the crystalline structure captivated her and made her want to look anyway. It was a bright blue—the color of the sky on Earth.

"I could make a scan using an artificial earthquake…but this close to the surface, the sand might absorb the sounding waves. I wonder if the sun ever reaches an angle where it could illuminate the inside for me."

The structure seemed worthy of investigation. Asuka was

considering whether she could use solar energetic particles to take a tomographic picture of it, or if the magnetic field would interfere, when four glowing blots appeared on its surface.

The lights trickled down the many-faceted crystalline exterior and gradually changed shape. One became a larval body Asuka had seen before. The larva reached an overhanging edge and began to form a droplet, along with the other three.

"It can't be!" Asuka said. "Sandalphon?"

This structure gives birth to Angels.

"I don't… I don't… I don't believe it!"

Anger built within Asuka. Her body trembled. *Whatever this is, it's an incredible discovery! Is this the key to everything?*

The four glowing drops fell toward the ground but never reached it, as twenty-some white hands thrust up from the soil and claimed them.

Without sparing a glance at her controls, Asuka readied her weapons systems. In what might have been record-setting time, the Powered 8 railgun was in the Allegorica's hands, but by then, the swarm of arms had vanished back into the ground.

"Agh!"

The arms began to reemerge. Asuka readied the Powered 8. But only eight arms came back out of the ground, attached to four bodies rising from the lunar soil.

They had wings. Asuka hadn't seen those yet.

"They're a new kind of Angel Carrier!"

An electronic chime announced that the Powered 8 had finished charging. Of its own accord, Asuka reflexively squeezed the trigger. She hadn't even realized she'd put her finger on it in the first place, but subconsciously, she wasn't going to let the same enemy escape twice.

Shit! Now I've done it. Now I'm going to have three Carriers coming after me, and I don't even have a battle plan!

Asuka had taken perfect aim, and the intense electromagnetic force accelerated the shell with incredible speed—but the shot

didn't strike its target. The Angel Carrier's shield hadn't repelled the projectile, nor had it dodged the shot. In the far distance, a massive column of sand erupted from the ground.

"My bullet passed right through?"

The Angel Carrier didn't seem to notice that it had been shot at.

What's going on?

Asuka fired again for confirmation.

The 8's tremendous kinetic energy ionized the moon dust and rocks where its shot landed, and the projectile's charged particles traveled along the flow of the magnetic field, creating several rainbow-colored arches against the starry sky.

Asuka roared in frustration. Her mind raced with everything that had happened from the battle with the Angels three years ago to her voyage to the moon. She lingered on Rei Cinq's death, and Shinji— *Shinji…*

As a full magazine's worth of regolith swirled in the rarified air, Asuka realized something.

Her bullets weren't only passing through the Angel Carriers. The 8's attacks had also sailed harmlessly through the sky-blue structure that, even to this moment, tried to repel her.

"I don't understand," she said.

But this might be the source!

It's right there. I can see it!

Overcome by extreme frustration, she ground her molars, pounded the controls with her fists, and screamed.

Shaking with rage, she watched as the events proceeded like nothing had happened at all. The four Carriers tucked the larvae into their bellies, stood erect, and sank back down into the ground.

Where are they going?

No—that's not what's important now. This crystal structure is.

Her attacks had passed straight through, but she didn't believe for a moment that the structure was a simple mirage. She could feel the tremendous resistance telling her, *Go away.*

Fighting the mysterious force with all her body, Asuka spurred Eva-02 Allegorica forward.

Chapter 38:
Departure

AN ALERT broke out in Tokyo-3.

Over the speakers, Hyuga announced. “Victor Two and Victor Three have been sighted on the right-hand ridge of Mount Daikan to the south of HQ. The same location as last time. They might be opening another window.”

Toji was eating a late dinner in the cafeteria. He grabbed a slice of toast from his tray and took off running down the hallway toward the command center, issuing orders over his headset. “Immediately suspend all repair and resupply operations! Instruct all civilians to remain underground as they proceed to the Tokyo-3 shelters. The salt pillar effect might happen again.”

Before he stuffed the toast into his mouth, he said, “Damn it, can’t a guy eat his dinner in peace?”

He turned the corner and nearly ran into a sleepy-eyed Ayanami Rei Six.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed, just barely dodging her.

A robot the size of a rice cooker accompanied Ayanami, monitoring her brain waves. The robot snickered.

“What’s the matter,” Six joked, “running late?”

“Nuh-uh!” Toji said. “Six, can you go out in the Eva?”

A pause. “Yeah.”

As he raced to the command center, Toji thought he should give the next set of orders over his headset. But just before he could, he glimpsed new orders scrolling across the unit’s tiny LCD.

The message was from the assistant to the deputy commander and read, “All personnel proceed to pressurized compartments and close all light-blocking shutters.”

Fuyutsuki didn’t miss a beat.

“Shinji,” Toji transmitted, “where are you? How long until you can get Super Eva resupplied?”

< < It's already done. > >

"Oh, yeah?" Toji blinked. That was fast. Too fast. "Hey, wait a minute! I didn't hear about that. What's going on?" He had a sudden realization and lowered his voice. "You were up to something, weren't you?"

Over the intercom, Ayanami's voice casually dropped the bombshell. < < Ikari-kun was planning to sneak out. > >

To the moon, no doubt, Toji thought. *That's going to be trouble.*

He slipped through a thick partitioning door as it slid closed.

"Shinji," Toji said, firmly, "we'll talk about this later."

< < Okay, > > Shinji said, but the young pilot probably couldn't think about anything aside from Asuka's disappearance. Now that Super Eva could fly, of course Shinji would want to go after her.

As Toji was considered the situation, Ayanami tossed a rock into the water.

< < It'll be fine, > > she said. < < I'm going with him. > >

< < Wait, you're *what* ? > > Shinji said, sounding flustered.

Actually, Toji thought, *that might be a good idea. When Maya-san was in the plug with him, Shinji managed to avoid getting swallowed up by Super Eva's power. What if her presence helped him assert control and come home in one piece?*

"Ayahachi," the deputy commander said, "I'll take you up on that!"

The two black giants opened the window. It sounded like an earthquake. Indifferent to the laws of physics, the rumbling noise penetrated tremor dampeners and soundproofing alike.

Toji passed through the doors to the command center.

Fuyutsuki was speaking with a technician. "Can you overlay damage control data on the map of the city's fortified districts?"

"Good evening," Toji said, observing the situation.

"The re-evacuation is taking longer than I'd like," Fuyutsuki reported. "Those things are hardly playing fair, opening that

window so close…and without any warning."

Fuyutsuki and Toji frowned at the display, where a map of the city was dominated by blinking red dots, indicating partially destroyed sectors, and patches of black, indicating total destruction.

"Even if we include the sectors under repair," Fuyutsuki remarked, "we're still sitting at forty percent."

"That's not gonna make this easy," Toji said. "But Super Eva can deploy right away."

Fuyutsuki raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Toji didn't explain. Instead, he asked, "What's the launch status of Unit Zero Type-F? Is Six ready?"

"The startup sequence has just completed," Hyuga answered. "She's on her way to the lifts. Do you want her sent to the sniping post at Mount Komagatake?"

"Do it. This is going to be a close call."

DWUM!

An eerie bell clap sounded, and the technicians stirred and fretted.

They knew what that sound meant. Victors Two and Three, the black giants that resembled Armaros but were the size of Evangelions, had opened another window. The picture on the main display was zoomed in on Lake Ashi's far shore. Through the darkness that was supposed to be there shone a light that wasn't—a bright blue sky. Last time, it had been day here, and the window had been dark.

If that window leads to somewhere else on Earth, Toji thought, *where might that be?*

Then he said, "Observation teams, don't look directly at that window. You'll turn to salt!"

After opening the portal, the two giants melted into the darkness and were gone.

But the trouble was only beginning.

"They're coming out!"

“Deputy Commander!” a flustered Aoba called. “I can’t locate Super Eva’s current position!”

“Don’t worry,” Toji replied. “It’s in what’s left of Cage Two. Shinji! Launch Super Eva!”

< < Acknowledged. > >

Super Eva flew up from the massive hole of the cage’s collapsed ceiling. The Eva was equipped with an experimental retractable cannon in its shoulder pylon and the SRL Bizen—a.k.a. Bizen Osafune—a Japanese-style sword as long as the Eva was tall.

Hyuga looked at the status screen, and his eyes widened with surprise. “Um, Shinji-kun? Your weapons are reporting an unauthorized pilot, and they aren’t configured for anyone else. Is someone in there with you? You won’t be able to fire!” He switched his comms channel to the lab. “Chief Ibuki, can you do anything?”

< < He just *had* to let someone in the plug unauthorized. > > The chief scientist sighed. < < That boy is always causing trouble! Hold on. I’ll send over a hotfix. > >

< < Sorry, > > Shinji said.

Ayanami’s voice quickly followed. < < We’re going out. > >

Taken aback, Hyuga said, “Shinji-kun, wait!”

But before the command room staff could process their surprise at hearing Ayanami from within Shinji’s plug, the enemy appeared.

“Eyes on the monitor!” Aoba said. “Look at the window. The Angel Carriers are coming.”

Several white arms reached through the blue window, clutching at its edges.

“There’s three,” Aoba reported, “no, make that four!”

The opening was a little small for all four giants to fit at once, but like a knot of snakes, they slithered and wriggled and twisted their bodies through.

Without a moment’s delay, Toji shouted into his headset, “Shinji, do it now! Fly through the window!”

The command center staff gasped as one—they hadn’t been in

on the plan—and Super Eva seared the sky with fiery light. As it accelerated, the orange trail grew even more dazzling against the night sky.

As before, the Angel Carriers had come for Super Eva's heart, but now they sought its wings, too. One—Sandalphon, apparently—took aim at Super Eva and fired spheres of light the reddish-black color of lava.

Super Eva didn't dodge the larva's attack. Instead, the Eva continued to barrel ahead, reaching forward with its left hand and projecting an A.T. Field to deflect the spheres. A pair of impossibly giant sharp-fanged jaws appeared from the cocoon of another Carrier standing in front of the gateway. That was Gaghiel, and Super Eva flew straight into its maw and was swallowed up whole. But then the Eva burst out the other side, Bizen sword in hand, slicing through with such incredible speed that the blood didn't even have time to fountain before Gaghiel exploded into red mist.

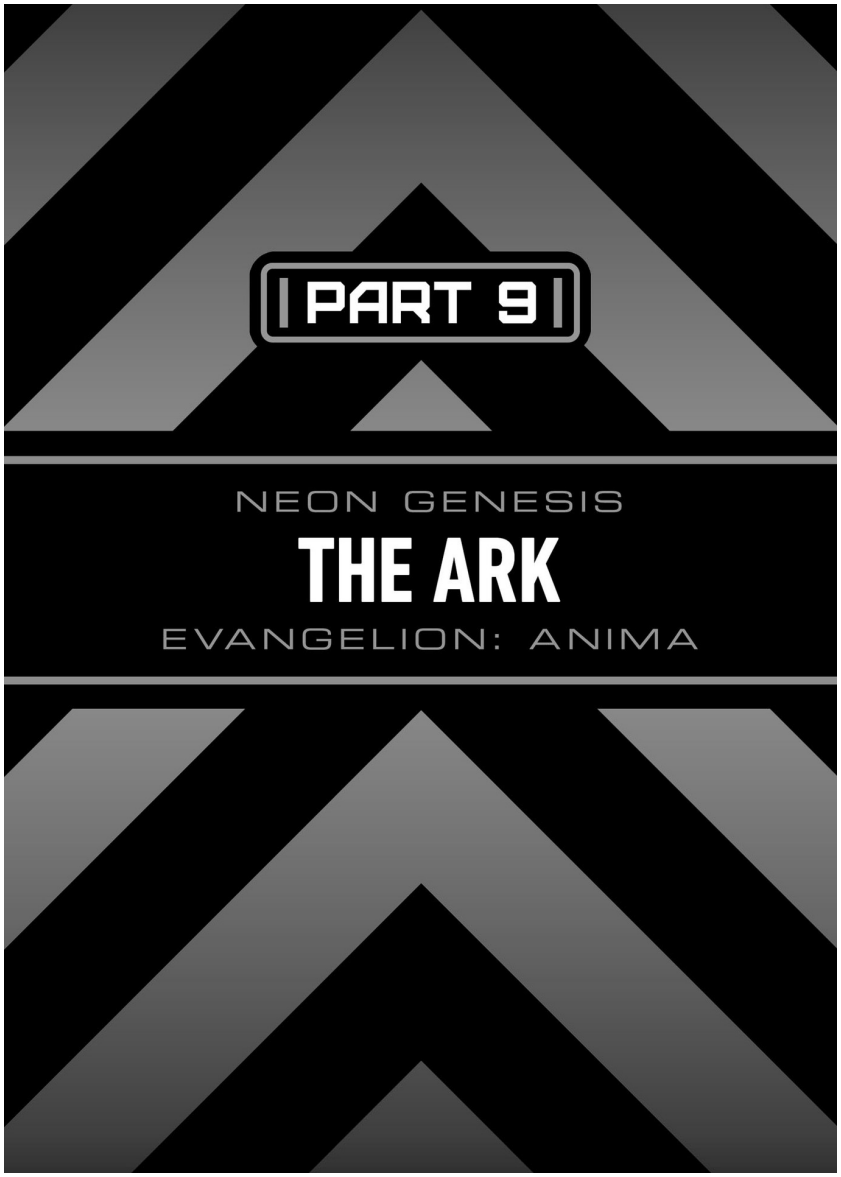
"Incredible," said Fuyutsuki.

Shinji replied with what would be his final transmission before disappearing into the portal. < < Fuyutsuki-sensei, Toji, I'll leave the rest in your hands! > >

"You can count on us," Toji said. "Except *you've* got the hard part."

But the pilot might not have heard, as he had already gone, leaving nothing behind but Super Eva's shock wave rumbling through the caldera.

The remaining Angel Carriers returned to the portal in pursuit of Super Eva's heart and wings, and the window into the blue sky closed.


PART 9
NEON GENESIS
THE ARK
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 39:
The Space Between

THE MOMENT SUPER EVA flew through the window, Shinji realized something was wrong. The window appeared to have no thickness; he'd presumed the portal would lead directly to the location on the other side. But now that location seemed far away.

The nearly two-dimensional window extended into something like a passageway. The other side appeared smaller now—like a picture mounted within a matted frame, shrinking, becoming ever more distant—even though Super Eva was supposedly flying toward it with the same incredible speed as before.

I might be in trouble, Shinji thought. *This is a problem of perception.*

I don't feel like I'm moving forward.

An aircraft could have kept its engines running and flown toward the retreating exit, but an Eva operated by the senses. If its pilot couldn't sense forward momentum, the Eva might become still.

The Angel Carriers were closing in from behind, and Shinji couldn't see Tokyo-3 beyond them. Apparently, that side had closed. Shinji was just beginning to panic when Ayanami Rei Trois spoke.

She was wearing the mental shielding suit and sitting in the pilot's seat, which Shinji had handed over to her, while he stood to the side in a motorcycle-pushing pose, leaning across her to hold the left and right control sticks.

"Maybe," Ayanami said, "he doesn't want us to pass."

Ah, Shinji thought, *this must be how our enemy attempts to oppose us.*

As if to confirm his theory, the gateway-opening twins appeared ahead.

"They've come," Ayanami said.

“I wish they hadn’t,” Shinji replied.

The Eva-sized giants each held an ornate, ringed staff the length of its body. *Some kind of blunt weapon?* They crossed their staves between them to block Super Eva’s path.

The gesture was, perhaps, overly dramatic, but its meaning would have been clear to anybody—they weren’t going to let him pass.

In Nerv Japan’s strategic division, the twin rift-opening giants were temporarily being called Victors Two and Three, but they would soon have to be given a more permanent designation. The current front-runners were decidedly uninspired—the Gatekeepers, or Ah and Un, named after the figures that stood outside temple gates. As the supposedly fast-moving Super Eva failed to close the distance between itself and the pair of guardians ahead, Shinji absently thought, *I guess those names aren’t so off the mark after all.*

As Ayanami’s fingers glided across the secondary control panel, smoothly inputting commands, she said, “I’m sorry, Ikari-kun, I’m still not finished initializing that new shoulder cannon.”

“That’s okay. You can save it for later—I get the feeling a fight is about to begin.”

“If they’ve come to block your path,” Ayanami said, “that means…”

“That means what?”

“They opened the window, but maybe they can’t force it closed if something is already traveling through.”

Huh, Shinji thought. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

There were enemies to the front and to the rear—and the ones ahead were still an unknown quantity.

Ayanami Rei Trois looked past Shinji’s head, his hair waving in the flow of the LCL, and watched the screen displaying the outside view. Though the possibility of a hard, chaotic battle hung in the air, Ayanami felt curiously secure.

Before the Battle at Nerv HQ three years ago, Ayanami had been rejected by Eva-01. Certainly, the thought-shielding gear she

wore now changed the circumstances, but the other presence within the Eva, Shinji's mother—who was, on a fundamental level, identical to Ayanami herself—had left. And now Ayanami could feel, almost tangibly, that Eva-01 and Shinji had become one and the same.

The LCL that filled the entry plug distributed the destructive-level forces of acceleration from the Eva's irregular and swift maneuvers and lessened the physical burden on the passengers, but that didn't mean there wasn't any jostling. After one such bump, Rei Trois shifted her hips to reposition herself, and she sank deeper into the pilot's seat. As a result, more of her body was pressed against Shinji's.

To reach the left control stick from his position on the right-hand side of the seat, Shinji had to lean his upper body across Ayanami's lap. His face, staring straight ahead, was right in front of her chest.

Without thinking, she reached up and gently touched her hand to his cheek.

"Huh?" Shinji said, caught off guard. "Wh-what was that for?"

"Nothing," Ayanami said.

Earlier, when Maya had seen Shinji become absorbed by the act of flight, he seemed to have transferred his consciousness into Super Eva, leaving his body frozen in position, stiff as a statue. To Shinji, in that moment, time had felt as if it flowed more slowly, and Super Eva had responded instantly to his commands.

Ayanami hadn't yet witnessed him in that state, but she thought that, from her perspective, the feeling that she was inside Shinji wouldn't change.

"All right," Shinji said. "Here we go!"

"Okay," Ayanami replied.

In this strange tunnel where motion was simultaneously fast and slow, Super Eva faced the enemies ahead with the SRL Bizen sword at the ready.

Chapter 40:
Outside the Window

BACK ON THE SOUTH SHORE of Lake Ashi, a large fire was burning. Someone sounded a shrill whistle.

"Wait!" the firefighter with the whistle shouted. "It's moving! Stop your work and retreat!"

The fire trucks began a hasty withdrawal, while behind them a bloody giant was attempting to stand up.

"Don't worry about the equipment!" the firefighter said. "Leave it all behind. Send word to HQ right away!"

The giant shook off the large clumps of dust and debris that had covered its body after its fall, and the detritus crashed loudly into the flaming ground, sending embers shooting into the air.

This was the Angel Carrier that had held the larva of the giant water-dwelling Angel, Gaghiel. Super Eva had blasted apart its larva en route to the window, but the Carrier still possessed one working Q.R. Signum.

The urgent message broke the calm that had only just returned to the command center.

"Six!" Toji shouted. "Unit Zero! Can you get a shot from the Komagatake sniping post?"

After Super Eva passed through the window in midair, the Angel Carriers had turned around and followed it back inside, and the window had abruptly vanished. As far as Nerv HQ had been able to see, the threat had passed. Nevertheless, the current shift remained battle-ready while Toji sent out the firefighting and rescue teams.

<< I'm tired, >> Six said.

"Hey! If you fall asleep now, there won't be a tomorrow for you to wake up to!"

On the transmission window, little Ayanami Six's hair fluttered in the LCL as she puffed out her cheeks and pouted her

lips. But she began to aim her weapon.

"Good girl," Toji said.

< < I'm in the same grade as you, y'know, > > she said. < < So, what's the decoy? > >

Toji quickly realized what she was thinking. They needed something to capture the Angel Carrier's attention. The attack would have to come as a surprise in order for Six to have any hope of penetrating its power shield. Even though the Carrier was down to a single Q.R. Signum, this was no time for foolish optimism. Eva-00 wasn't Super Eva.

"All right," he said. "Let's see if we can get that thing's attention with a UAV."

Just then, the scale of the map on the main screen zoomed out to place the entirety of the Hakone caldera within its borders, and Super Eva's location indicator appeared to the southwest, beyond the caldera's edge. But Shinji's IFF system wasn't responding.

"What is that?" Hyuga asked. The system had picked up gravitational waves matching those that Super Eva produced. "Do you think it could be another copy?"

The sensors were responding to Super Eva's unique heartbeat.

"Like Euro-II?" Fuyutsuki offered.

The wounded Angel Carrier responded to the heartbeat and turned on unsteady feet to face south, putting its back to Eva-00 Type-F. Six didn't pass up the opportunity. She nudged the crosshairs to the left.

Six began singing an odd little tune in 3/4 time. "Dum-da-da, dum-da-da." She followed the Carrier's shoulder movements. "Dum-da-da, dum-da-da. Use the rhythm to adjust for the target's future position."

Eva-00 Type-F had no right arm or leg. Because the giant cannon had been attached in their place, the Eva misidentified the weapon as part of its body and generated an A.T. Field in the acceleration chamber.

"Bang!"

Six squeezed the trigger, and a projectile of charged particles left the enclosed cyclotron, spiraled and compressed inside an egg-shaped chamber to gain even more acceleration, and zoomed through the barrel.

The A.T Field-based particle cannon, called the Angel's Backbone, fired relatively quietly for its size, but its nearly instantaneous impact was tremendous. The particles obliterated the Angel Carrier's Q.R. Signum, and the light from the explosion and cascading fragments illuminated the monster as it fell near the base of the mountain.

"Yeah!" Six shouted.

An unencrypted message came over the comm.

< < Nerv Japan, can you hear me? I'm crossing into the caldera. Don't shoot. > >

With all its safety lights illuminated to avoid an accidental shooting, a mechanized giant appeared on the southern ridgeline.

"What the hell is that?" Toji asked.

In the dark, the mechanical giant's lights looked like motion capture sensors. The mech raised an arm toward the kneeling Carrier, and with sudden, brilliant pulses of light, the Carrier was completely blown away. Moments later, the roar of cannon fire crossed the lake. The vertical and horizontal array of twenty large-caliber autocannons had unleashed a wall of depleted-uranium-based kinetic energy, and the Carrier's upper body was totally vaporized into a scattering mist.

This was the JSSDF's giant robot, Akashima.

One older way of writing "typhoon" used two separate kanji characters—but they could also be combined as a single, vivid glyph and pronounced "Akashima," itself an old word for typhoon, and the robot's namesake. Appropriately, earsplitting turbines propelled the Akashima as it planted its heavy legs on the outer ring of mountains and slowly found its balance. The false gravity waves —the copy of Super Eva's heartbeat—stopped.

It seemed the Akashima's weapons weren't its only new equipment.

“Now the JSSDF’s mechanical puppet has quantum wave mirrors, too?” Maya remarked.

The N_2 reactor was likely supplying the necessary gravitons. First the Europeans’ Eva, the Euro-II, and now this. Apparently, copying Super Eva’s heartbeat was becoming a fad.

"Well, thanks," Shinji said. "At least you helped me find the tree with the spare ammo."
"I had a hunch you were planning to make a break for it. You are, aren't you?"
"Be my body."
"This is no positron cannon. It's designed to harvest the particle stream directly from the Center Trigonus."
EXW-038 Guided Artillery Cannon
NEYARL

Chapter 41:
The Egg of Time

TO JUSTIFY THEIR INTRUSION into the caldera, the JSSDF cited an agreement that allowed them to take preventative measures whenever they forecast that a large-scale threat would cross the outer ring of mountains.

"Does anyone buy that?" Hyuga asked. "I think they wanted to test whether their imitation heartbeat could attract the Angel Carriers."

The Akashima's pilot spoke over the radio. < < Is the person in charge around? > >

"You're looking at him." Toji said.

The Akashima's transmission switched to an encrypted video signal. The pilot wore a soldier's uniform and was strapped into all sorts of harnesses. He removed his head visor, introduced himself as Warrant Officer Endo of the Anti-Angel Rapid Response Unit, and requested to speak with Commander Katsuragi Misato.

"I'm Acting Deputy Commander Suzuhara," Toji replied. "The commander is busy attending to another matter. If you have anything to say to Nerv Japan, well, this kid right here will hear you." When no response came, Toji said, "Well, if that's all..." and started hanging up.

< < Wait, Acting Deputy Commander Suzuhara. > > Endo broke into a grin. < < Sorry to drop in on you like this. My squad was transferred to Tokyo-2 for a while, and we were just redeployed outside the caldera, so I thought I'd stop by and say hello. You'll be hearing from the Japanese government or your parent organization soon. The government is in talks with the UN to temporarily relocate a portion of their functions to Tokyo-3. > >

"They're what?" said Aoba on the middle deck. He shook his head as if to say, *I hadn't heard about this* .

The UN held the Hakone caldera under a treaty. This story seemed strange.

“JSSDF forces are gathering,” Hyuga quietly informed Fuyutsuki, “Not in large numbers, but they’re gathering. In Yumoto, to the east, and on the far side of Otome Pass, to the west.”

“And that mech team is holding the south,” Fuyutsuki said, then thought, *They’re holding their knife to our artery of electricity and goods, and seeing if we flinch. We can cover our electricity needs on our own for a little while, but we can’t afford to let our food supplies be cut off.*

“But why here?” Toji asked.

The pilot chuckled. << You might think you’re the experts at dealing with all this calamity, but sometimes it’s hard to notice what’s right at your feet. This land is the most seismically stable place in all of Japan. Strange, I know, considering the nearby fault lines. But for whatever reason, the tremors are being suppressed here. Our science advisors have a theory—the cause has something to do with the Chronostatic Sphere. >>

“Hey, that’s not true,” Toji said. “We get plenty of tremors here.”

But even as he said it, Toji considered that the scenario Endo described was plausible.

That perfectly dark egg had swallowed up the former HQ and Central Dogma. A great many things were unknown about the sphere, as it permitted no reflections of any kind. But Lilith *was* inside. Assuming that Lilith had frozen time and gone to sleep, it might be waiting for the next world’s Instrumentality Project, as Armaros proclaimed.

Chapter 42:
Kaji, Misato, Quatre, and…

REI QUATRE WAS THE FIRST to be attacked. Armaros embedded his Q.R. Signum into her Eva and made her hear his voice. Under the centralized control of the primary Ayanami—Trois—Quatre had lived in a perpetual state of slumber, with no individuality of her own. Her individuality had awakened amid the terror of being shot while orbiting the Earth.

She'd been running away, desperately trying to escape the despair, confusion, and loneliness.

That was her whole existence now. After the voices of her other selves became intermittent, those negative emotions defined her, and her fretfulness had driven her every move.

She saw herself in Misato, suffering in agony after Seele hijacked Kaji's mind. And so Quatre escaped the role she had been forced into and brought Misato all the way here to this island on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea.

And yet, she still had questions.

"Why don't you escape your cage?" Quatre asked Misato.

"My cage?" Misato asked. "Never mind. You can explain what you mean later. Take Eva-0.0 away from here as quickly as you can. You don't have any reason to fight the Euro Eva."

The Euro-II was parting the clouds and heading this way. It likely already had them in its sights.

"Answer me," Quatre said. "Why do you keep playing your part? Seeing Kaji like this, how can you act normally? You cared for him, didn't you?"

With Quatre not taking any action, Misato saw no choice but to respond. "You call *this* normal?" She gestured to herself. "Look, I'm not going to answer you, because you'll never understand unless you realize it for yourself. But what I'll say is this. If you think it has anything to do with my age—my adulthood—you'd be wrong."

Then she asked Quatre a question of her own. “What did you want me to see here?”

Observing this exchange, Seele’s vessel chuckled.

“You’re wasting your time,” said the man who used to be Kaji. “Ikari Gendo’s puppet can only act out interpersonal relationships; there’s no actual understanding there.”

Apparently, Seele wasn’t going to treat Ayanami as a human being. Speaking as if he could see right through her, the Kaji-vessel continued. “The puppet that’s your primary—what did you designate her? Ayanami Rei Number Trois, was it? When the link that connected the puppets was disrupted, all the emotions the primary had never been able to express were distorted and brought to the surface. It’s painful to see.”

Eva-0.0’s warped armor suddenly creaked and groaned, and a giant hand scooped up Kaji. But the vessel kept on grinning.

“Let me guess,” he said, “you’re her fear.”

Apparently, he’d guessed the truth, and it had struck a nerve.

“Quatre! Stop!” Misato said.

Fear that she’d lost Gendo by rejecting him.

Fear that the future was lost after the failure of the Human Instrumentality Project.

Fear of the emptiness she felt when Shinji wouldn’t become the person she could lean upon.

The confusion and disorder stemming from those fears formed the core of Ayanami Rei Quatre’s being.

The former Kaji kept on stoking her anger. “As Akagi Ritsuko might say, pathetic.”

The Eva’s fist tightened, nearly crushing the Kaji-vessel. She raised him higher, closer to where she stood and level with the Q.R. Signum in Eva-0.0’s chest, so that she could glare at him.

It was that Q.R. Signum that had radically and traumatically changed her Eva. The black giant on the moon had shot the scale into her Eva, but the key had been the portion of Ayanami’s emotions divided into Quatre herself.

Showing no signs of pain at all, the Kaji-vessel scoffed and

continued to goad Quatre. “I bet you don’t even know that you’re angry right now.” Then the man looked down and shouted, “Katsuragi Misato, I’ll show you an old trick!”

The Kaji-vessel reached out a hand, past Quatre’s ear and around her back.

“Thanks for the assist, puppet,” he said, placing his hand on the Q.R. Signum.

Eva Euro-II was still far away, but the military escort planes began peeling off and hiding on the far side of the mountains, as if to avoid the shock waves of an imminent attack.

“Quatre,” Misato said, “we can worry about everything else later. Just please, escape *now* !”

But if Quatre wasn’t going to leave, then Kensuke had another suggestion.

“The Euro-II’s within range of your gamma-ray laser, isn’t it?” he shouted up to her. “Take that Eva out!”

“No,” Misato said quickly. “You mustn’t do that. The pilot is your classmate, Horaki-san!”

Kensuke’s shoulders stiffened. “What?”

In truth, Kensuke was secretly responsible for Hikari’s family being taken by Germany. Even so, this came as surprising news. When Asuka left Germany, she’d brought all of the data on pilot and Eva compatibility to the Japanese side. Kensuke knew that Germany had restarted Evangelion development using their old, scrapped models, but they’d struggled to find appropriate child pilots. They’d even looked to other countries to find sample candidates. But Germany’s Eva was a symbol for Germany, not the world, and as such, Kensuke couldn’t imagine they’d let anyone not of German descent pilot the machine.

He smelled something burning deep in his nose, like he’d taken a punch, and his ears rang. “Damn it!” he said. “Damn it!”

The mutant Eva-0.0 picked up the disoriented Kensuke along with Misato.

The Kaji-vessel was no longer in its hand. Instead, he was

standing behind Quatre with both arms around her.

"Fly, Ikari's broken doll," Kaji said.

"Yes," she replied. "As you command."

With a tremendous blast of heat and electricity, the ground exploded.

Eva Euro-II's positron shell released a burst of electromagnetic and radiation waves, which carved a crater across the entire area. But by then, Eva-0.0 had already vanished, seemingly melting into the ground.

The sky and the ground spun.

Misato felt the sensation of being transposed through the Earth, and Unit Quatre reemerged at the bottom of a deep chasm. It was a strange place with nearly vertical cliffs and blood-red ground.

Looking out between the Eva's fingers, Misato demanded, "What did you do to Quatre?!"

"A puppet is nothing more than a transmitter. Besides, *I* didn't do anything. That was the black giant's scale—what you call the Q.R. Signum. I told you we can access its abilities."

"Kaji-kun—who, need I remind you, is inside you right now—would never refer to Quatre in that way."

"Katsuragi Misato, why don't you stop and enjoy the view?"

The vessel continued to speak in Kaji's flippant manner, and it was only making Misato angrier.

But their eerie surroundings had caught her attention. All around them stood formations resembling giant limbs that had been dragged out from the cliff face. Strewn around the limbs were smaller, grotesque, viscera-like rocks half-buried in the surface.

"What is this?" Misato asked.

"Quite the repulsive scenery, isn't it? Technically, everything you see is natural stone. But sometimes, after the great flood resets the world, if the thoughts and deeds of man run deep enough, an image from the past world carries on to the next in some shape, such as these formations."

Still reeling from his first displacement through space,

Kensuke looked through the gaps between the Eva's fingers and said, "What is this?"

"Exactly what it looks like. This place is called the Valley of Human Bodies. This was the site of a bloody battle between hundreds of Evangelions. In the last world, that is. They killed each other, round-robin style, until only one Eva was left standing. They hoped that the scale of death would open the tree of life."

Misato had seen that tree etched into the sky during the battle at HQ three years ago.

"The Human Instrumentality Project," she said.

"Yes. In this case—well, actually, the earthquakes opened a crack in the rocks. You can see a little bit if you walk around over there."

When they saw it, they were struck by a flash of light with no brightness and a roar with no sound.

Misato and Kensuke staggered back inside the Eva's hand, covering their ears and looking away.

We're being rejected. A message without words. What had she glimpsed as she covered her eyes? *Something…black? Dark-colored glass, like obsidian.*

Casually, the Kaji-vessel said, "That's the Ark everyone's been searching for. Welcome to the northwest shoulder of Africa. These are the Atlas Mountains, named after a giant."

"What?" Kensuke said, struggling against the force that was trying to keep him away. "Let me…get…closer!"

"That's a good idea," said the Kaji-vessel. "You should learn for yourself."

Kaji snapped his fingers.

Kensuke yelped as the mutant Eva-0.0 lowered its hand and opened a finger, dumping him to the ground while keeping Misato within.

Separated from the Eva, Kensuke began to writhe and moan on the ground.

“Aida-kun!” Misato shouted. Then she smelled a familiar, sweet scent.

When the first portal had opened outside Tokyo-3, the wind had carried this same scent from the other side.

She hadn’t noticed, until now, the fallen pillars of salt dotting the ground.

“No, Aida!” Misato shouted. “You have to come back.”

“This is the fruit of his labor,” the Kaji-vessel said.

Kensuke clutched at his chest with his left hand and reached out his right toward the object the Kaji-vessel had called the Ark.

“I’m impressed he still seeks it,” the Kaji-vessel remarked.

Kensuke’s right arm turned to salt and crumbled. His sleeve lost structure and went slack.

“Aida!” Misato shouted.

But his transformation stopped there. Kensuke fell to the ground and curled into a ball, moaning and convulsing.

“Oh, does he have the metal?” the vessel asked. “Is he clever or just lucky?”

Just then, the roar of Allegorica-wing graviton floaters rumbled through the canyon, and Eva Euro-II appeared from the red, viscera-like rock face.

“What?!” the Kaji-vessel exclaimed. “Were you dragged here because your Q.R. Signum resonated with our displacement, or have you figured out how to displace yourself? If it’s the latter, I’m going to be annoyed.”

Euro-II fired before it had even fully materialized from the rock, and the dazzling positron shell whizzed past the mutant Eva-0.0.

“You’ve picked a fine way to waste my time until the next Instrumentality Project,” the Kaji-vessel said.

The mutant Eva-0.0 dropped Misato to the ground, and she tumbled, stopping when she struck Kensuke’s cowering form.

From atop the Eva’s shoulder, the man who’d once been Kaji

smiled down at her and shouted, “He’s carrying ancient metal. If you don’t want to die, stay near Aida Kensuke! The Ark will reject sentient beings, but the way it was initially set up, if there’s a male and female pair, well, you might say it won’t reject you as strongly. Anyway, good luck, Katsuragi Misato!”

Covered in dust, Misato realized with surprise just how close she’d leaned in to Kensuke’s face.

I didn’t mean to land here!

But she *did* feel like the repelling force was a little weaker here.

“Misato…san…”

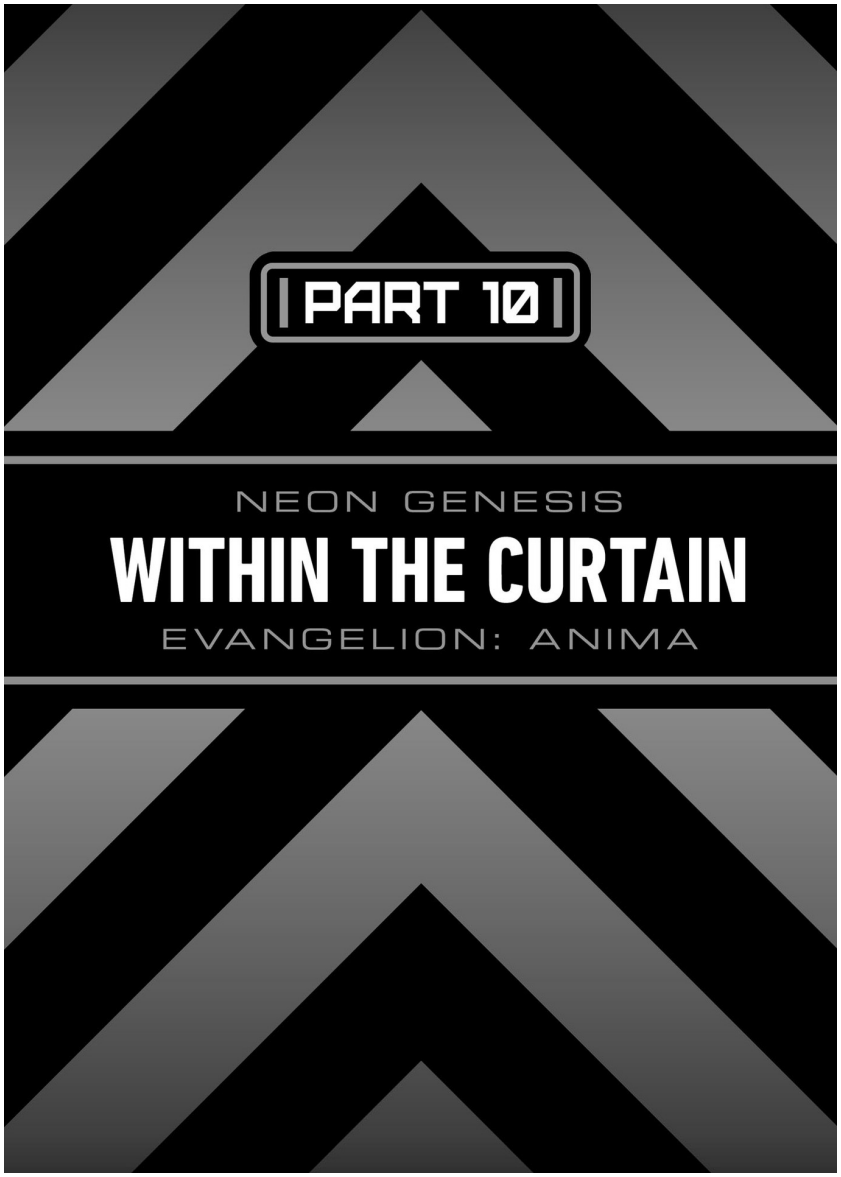
Kensuke was still conscious.

The mutant Eva-0.0 stood, and its restraint armor creaked and groaned.

“Do you know why Evas are so gigantic?” the Kaji-vessel asked. “Because they’re part of a ritual. They’re made to gather the attention of people throughout the land. The more attention they gather, the better they can command the flock.”

“Don’t you ever shut up, Ryoji?” Misato snapped. She tried to help Kensuke to his feet, while behind them, the mutant Eva-0.0 began charging up the gamma-ray laser cannon on its right arm. It flapped the black wings it had stolen from the Angel Carrier and extended them to their full length.

Red dust scattered violently, and Unit Quatre ascended to confront Eva Euro-II.


PART 10
NEON GENESIS
WITHIN THE CURTAIN
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 43:
The Eva Graveyard

IN THE SKIES of northern Africa, two Evangelions engaged in a firefight. The noise of their battle echoed off the rocks in the canyon and became an undiscernible cacophony. From the bottom of the gorge, it was impossible to track where the Evas' battle had moved. The result was bewildering and all the more terrifying for it.

Ahead of Misato and the one-armed, cowering Kensuke, a dark glass structure peeked out from the rocks. Seele's vessel—the former Kaji—had called it the Ark.

Calamities filled every corner of the Earth now.

The Longinus Curtain was shrinking the Earth with unstoppable power. With nowhere else to go, the oceans' waters spilled over, and the swirling tectonic plates could visit disaster upon any person or place.

In that moment, the word "Ark" sounded like salvation.

But was it really? Did that mass of smooth-surfaced cubes really offer rescue? Misato regarded the gapless structure with suspicion. If the Ark offered salvation, why was it trying this hard to repel her?

The Ark emanated some kind of hostile power that turned people into pillars of salt, though Kensuke seemed to possess a method of resisting the effect. But even then, he'd lost his right arm, and both he and Misato continued to suffer the exceptionally unpleasant repulsing force. The power made it hard for her to concentrate, and as she faced the Ark, visible through the uncanny rock formations, which themselves seemed to be writhing, she began to feel that turning to salt might be preferable than experiencing this much longer.

The Kaji-vessel had said that this was the final battleground for hundreds of Evangelions.

And their emotions were left behind in this form.

Even as a fairy tale, the story would have stretched credulity. And yet, all throughout this deep ravine, the giants of the past world had left behind humanoid rock formations and scattered mounds of viscera-like rocks.

Misato draped her coat over Kensuke's shoulders, then pulled out the sleeves and fastened them tight around his wound. The knot quickly turned red.

"I would've expected more bleeding…" he said. "I don't understand why there isn't, but I'm glad for it. Do you suppose that's another divine miracle?" He grunted in pain.

"Spare the tough talk."

He was right about the blood, or rather, the lack of it. But it still must have hurt. Kensuke was dripping with sweat. And still his eyes remained transfixed upon the Ark, as if he'd decided that, having already eaten the poison, he might as well lick the plate.

"Misato-san," he said, with great effort. "Commander…it's spinning."

"What?"

Now that he said it, Misato noticed that the Ark was rotating horizontally. The structure spun almost imperceptibly—the only hint was the movement of the sun's reflection off its many smooth surfaces.

Currently, the topmost point of one of the square faces was disappearing into a rock. The connecting edge followed, swallowed up by the stone. On the other end, the edges and face of the opposite side sprouted from the rocks.

"Does it not have a physical presence?" Misato wondered aloud.

The Ark was passing through the rocks as it turned. Could it be an illusion?

Smoke rose from beyond the ravine's walls, and moments later, the roar of an explosion thundered across the rocks.

Ayanami Rei Quatre and her Eva were obeying the Kaji-vessel's commands. And right now, he was commanding them to

fight Eva Euro-II.

Above the ridgeline, Misato saw a burst of smoke and spreading shock waves. *Is that from Euro-II's positron rifle?*

She immediately threw her body over Kensuke's. The shot seemed to have been fired toward the opposite side of the rocky mountain's ridge, but—

FWUM!

The shock wave slammed into the pair, and moments later, pebbles rained down around them.

"Misato-san," Kensuke said. "Please, protect yourself."

The shock wave hurtled through the forest of rocky colossi; one crumbled, and the collapse opened a view to the sky above the ravine wall, where a dust cloud rose, and a rectangular window hung in the air.

Chapter 44:
Transdimensional Corridor

SHINJI POSSESSED little information about the twin giants. The even larger Armaros held two wing-like plates on its back, but the Victors each only had one. Victor Two was the one on the right, and Victor Three on the left, and whenever they touched their plates together, and then separated them, the space between formed a window to another place. And that was all Shinji knew about the Victors' abilities; he knew nothing about their strength in combat.

The two previous times they'd intruded into the caldera, they'd appeared to drag the bottom tips of their back plates along the ground. Armaros had only shown himself once on the moon, but his plates had also extended to the surface.

Now the Victors had arrived floating in the air, and their plates turned out not to end at their feet but extended below into a curve, becoming indistinct then fading into nothingness—probably at the boundary of this tunnel space.

Or do I have it backwards? Do the plates come out from the ground and the Victors out from the plates?

In the cockpit with him, Ayanami Rei Trois whispered sharply, "They're moving!"

In unison, the two Victors came swooping down, ready to strike Super Eva with their staves. Because the distance between him and the Victors had remained constant in this strange place, Shinji had let his guard down, but Super Eva caught both staves with its Bizen sword, and—

Shinji grunted in pain as Super Eva was knocked backward. Bubbles formed in the LCL. The Victors were shockingly strong. Back when Super Eva was still Unit One, their attack might have shattered the Eva's A.T. Field entirely.

"Ikari-kun!" Trois said.

Several indicators on the status panel turned red. Shinji moaned and then said, "I'm… I'm fine. It's reconnected now."

“What’s reconnected?”

“They broke my arm.” Shinji gritted his teeth in pain. But the injury was healing quickly, and Super Eva resumed a fighting stance, Bizen sword at the ready. Still, Shinji couldn’t get any closer to his attackers.

Not only was the enemy strong, but Shinji felt as if he were in a dream, paralyzed and struggling. He couldn’t sense if Super Eva was moving, and in reality, it wasn’t. Shinji was starting to worry.

Ayanami Trois sensed that his expression had changed. She looked behind her. The winged Angel Carriers were closing in.

Inside this space, it was impossible to perceive speed, and the more that doubt crept into Shinji’s mind, the slower Super Eva moved. Trois looked forward again and watched Shinji’s hair swaying in the LCL. She thought for a moment and then said, “Quatre is on the other side of the window.”

Shinji was caught off guard. “What?”

“I’ve reconnected with her through the mental mirror link, though the connection is very faint.”

“Do you know what’s going on out there?”

“You need to hurry!”

A sudden acceleration, and Trois’ back was pressed against the seat. She felt like the force might crush her. Once again, the LCL couldn’t contain the supersaturated gases—though this time it was due to the Eva’s own acceleration. The plug filled with white bubbles.

Picking up tremendous speed, Super Eva began trailing a band of light and burning bright orange spirals into the walls—such as they were within this incomprehensible tunnel.

Shinji had always underestimated his own abilities—or rather, he didn’t believe he possessed special talent at all—and however else he’d grown, that remained true to this day. In his present situation, he couldn’t help but doubt what he was doing. But when given an external motivation, grounded in someone other than himself, he wouldn’t let anything in the world stop him.

The Ayanami Rei clones—Trois in particular—lacked self-

awareness and the ability to express their emotions, but that didn't mean they were unable to observe emotions in others.

Sometimes, that which a person lacked, or lacked an understanding of within themselves, was more readily apparent in others. Unfortunately, those observations were like building blocks —they could only stack so high. Still, Trois had observed Shinji through her own lens, and on this day, she told her first lie.

In order to ride inside Super Eva without causing thought feedback, she was wearing mental shielding gear. Any link with Quatre was impossible.

Super Eva charged toward the two Victors, but when the giant came within range of the guardians, it suddenly changed course. The band of light maintained its momentum, crashing into the Victors and exploding in a cascade of sparks. Meanwhile, Super Eva deflected its floating field and circled around to flank the guardians.

"How do you like this?!" Shinji shouted.

Super Eva put one Victor between himself and the other. The shower of light had created an opening in their defenses, and the Eva slashed its SRL Bizen. Unable to position its shield in time, the Victor caught the blow on its staff instead.

Clang! Sparks flew.

The Bizen recoiled from the impact with its pommel facing the Victor. Super Eva switched its grip and slammed the pommel straight down onto the gatekeeper's shoulder.

As the Victor in front crumpled, the other thrust its staff. Super Eva caught the attack with its A.T. Field-enhanced blade, but the staff kept coming. The guardian's attack landed head-on with incredible force, sending Super Eva's gigantic body flying backward.

As Shinji had feared, the Armaros-type giants were even stronger than their Eva-like size suggested.

"Ikari-kun," Trois said. Her voice was strained. "It's too much!"

As an experienced Eva pilot, Trois weathered the rapid succession of impacts, but it was still hard, even on her.

Several of the Vertex Wings' field induction plates had been stressed beyond their limits, and a number of damage control windows popped open.

"But I have to do something!" Shinji replied.

Shinji's back stopped moving, and his voice came from the cockpit's speakers.

So, this is what Chief Ibuki saw, Trois realized. The scientist had explained that Shinji's consciousness had transferred to Super Eva while his human body was left behind in the entry plug. Shinji was now experiencing time on a non-human scale, just as Maya had said; he'd hardened in place.

"Trois," he said through the speakers. "I'm going in again!"

After being struck, Super Eva had continued to fly backward, flipping through the air. When it came upon the pursuing Angel Carriers, the Eva used its spinning momentum to force the Bizen through one of their shields.

Super Eva lifted both legs and stomped down on the Carrier. By then, the Bizen had penetrated through its body, carving a path from its left shoulder down to its stomach. The force of the Eva's kick sent the bloodied Carrier flying—and Shinji resumed his course toward the end of the tunnel.

The Eva's explosive dash seared the air, and once again the giant brought its long sword to bear against the Victors.

Even with all this power, Trois thought, *Super Eva's inertial mass must be getting extremely heavy. And yet, it can still maneuver this quickly.*

The G-forces were beginning to cloud Trois' consciousness, but she noticed a new window pop open on the screen—it belonged to the misconfigured shoulder-mounted positron cannon.

"Ikari-kun!" she said as Super Eva's heartbeat raced and energy surged through the doorway to higher dimensions contained within the triangular plate in the Eva's chest—the Center Trigonus.

The weapon within the right shoulder pylon linked with the fire control system and began its startup sequence.

"Ikari!" Trois repeated. "That new gun in your shoulder is moving on its own!"

Chapter 45:
Asuka and the Ark

ASUKA'S EVA-02 ALLEGORICA ran across the craggy lunar surface toward the blue glass-like structure and the force that repelled her approach.

The localized geomagnetic field selectively filtered out the bombardment of cosmic rays and created a gray-and-black-striped abstract pattern in the regolith. Here and there, amid the patches that hadn't been baked by the radiation, the soil showed curious patterns of stripes and swirls. After the Second Impact, as Earth entered the twenty-first century, all public lunar exploration had ceased, and planetary scientists knew little of the large magnetic anomaly on the far side of the moon. Asuka was the first to confirm its existence.

But something was strange. If the magnetic field had been the result of an asteroid impact, then it should have formed in swirls, but here they radiated outward from a central point—toward which Eva-02 Allegorica bounded.

Is this the remnant of a magnetic shield?

Doesn't matter, Asuka told herself. *I saw Angel larvae being born! I saw Angel Carriers summoned and bestowed with that larvae! That's what matters right now.*

It was all the reason she needed to destroy the structure.

The only local force her Eva's external sensors registered was gravity, but the resistance Asuka felt was nothing like that. It was like being buffeted by a powerful wind, even though there was no wind on the surface of the moon. The force had likely turned the soldiers in that armored car to pillars of salt before they could even asphyxiate.

The unnatural force was like a gale driving into Asuka's face; it was so blinding, so real, that she couldn't keep her eyes open.

But I have to keep going, no matter what. If I've found the source

of the cataclysm, I could put a stop to everything!

"Do you think you have the power," Asuka said, breathing heavily, "to stop me?!"

Eva-02 Allegorica's four legs pounded fiercely against the moon's surface. In the low gravity, the Eva's gallop was more like a series of slow-motion jumps. Each time Eva-02 landed, a small, inverted cone-like cloud blossomed from the regolith. This was no longer the moon with only one-sixth the Earth's gravity—the moon was swelling, ugly and bulging—but it still had a lower gravity than Earth.

So why does each step feel so heavy?

Asuka put away the Eva's Powered 8 and replaced the railgun with the Magorox sword. She was surprised when she noticed Eva-02's hand shaking through the feedback signal. But she pressed on.

"Hyah!" she shouted as she drew the sword. She was almost upon the structure, her Eva reflected large in the crystalline surface. The two winged centaurs faced each other, paint scratched and armor battle-worn.

And then their images overlapped.

Suddenly, all was still. The repelling force was gone, and Asuka felt weightless.

The structure had appeared blue from the outside, but the inside was complete darkness. She felt the lunar soil beneath her feet; it continued freely through the structure's outer walls. She brought Eva-02 sliding to a stop. So far, nothing unexpected had happened on a physical level. With her sword held at the ready, Eva-02 Allegorica had passed inside the glass structure, just as the rounds of her Powered 8 had done.

This was going exactly as she'd predicted.

I've been saving one last N_2 bomb in case I have to fight Armaros, Asuka thought, *but what if I plant it in the middle of this place instead? Even if all my attacks pass through, this structure is linked to the moon's surface. What if I wipe out the ground it stands upon? Or—*

Suddenly, Eva-02 Allegorica whirled around.

After everything she'd been through on this journey, Asuka had become fully comfortable moving on four legs. She nimbly shifted her weight to the hind legs, and her front half lifted off the ground, the armor creaking. The Magorox flashed through the space that had just been directly behind her—and passed through emptiness.

"Who's there?" Asuka demanded of the darkness.

There was someone there. Or some ones .

The sound of a crowd.

Something—or *things* —surrounded Eva-02. Standing quietly in place. Inhaling. Exhaling. Their breath spreading through a space larger than the structure had been on the outside. Countless presences extending unbroken to the far horizon.

Asuka could feel them all watching her.

"What are you?!"

She directed the thrusters in one Allegorica wing forward and the other backward, and quickly spun the Eva around as she swung the long sword again. There was nothing there, but she could still feel all those eyes upon her.

"Take this! And this!"

The sword's tip slashed useless arcs in the air. Out of fear and frustration, she wildly swung the weapon again and again and—

WHAM!

The loud sound shook her body, and an alert window popped open. The Magorox's handguard had struck the right Allegorica wing. The N_2 reactor on that side went into emergency shutdown, and the other systems in the wing began to self-repair. The arrival of a stack of red and yellow subwindows brought Asuka back to her senses.

Rattled, she told herself, "Wait. Focus. You need to destroy this place, remember?"

With a start, she looked over her shoulder, all around the plug.

Those invisible things were *inside the plug with her!* Someone or

something was filling the space everywhere.

"N-no!" Asuka screamed.

The countless, quiet *things* reacted to her scream in unison, beginning to move, swirling together, making a lot of noise.

The noise. Are those…voices?

The sounds came from everywhere and blended into an unintelligible mass, like a great army of bees swarming around their hive. Every now and then, the sounds seemed to align, creating a sporadic, wave-like effect.

"These are people's voices. These are people!"

It was the sound of billions, maybe even tens of billions of people.

When Asuka came to that understanding, she realized her body was no longer within her entry plug.

My body is gone.

She looked down at her empty seat from above. She couldn't see her hands, or her legs, or her any part of her. All that remained was her vision. *No,* she realized, *I can hear, too,* although she didn't know if she was perceiving actual light and sound.

Oh, I understand.

She was becoming like the people around her. When she touched one, she knew immediately who they were. Their individual lives flashed before her, from their births to their deaths. She knew their names, the era they'd been born in, their successes and failures, their meetings and partings. She saw everything that made them who they were in a fleeting flash of light.

People as data.

Witnessing entire lives in moments, Asuka's mind was overwhelmed, almost to the point of shutting down. But still she realized, *I'm becoming data, too.*

The interior of the entry plug—the seat and everything else—was beginning to lose its form.

Is the Eva going to become data as well?

Her lack of panic was all she needed to conclude that she was in an abnormal state.

I can feel light from the distance.

Beyond the horizon of human data came an even louder billowing, like tsunami waves crashing. As soon as she noticed it, she was there, swept up by the current.

She found herself within a turbulent flow made up of pairs from every species of animal ever to undergo the cycle of life and death on Earth. Soon found her way to the sea creatures and swam among them. There were aquatic dinosaurs and huge whales.

"Incredible!"

"If he saw this…I think he'd be thrilled."

Who would be?

A pair of dolphins swam tightly together as they passed by Asuka.

Dolphins… The blue sea…

As soon as she thought of the book, it appeared before her, its pages turning in the flow of the LCL, reconnecting her memories.

She'd been given the book as a gift before she left the Earth.

The person who gave this to me was…

"Shinji!" Asuka shouted, as if waking from a dream. Then she asked no one, "What is this?!"

The data responded, and Asuka received the answer in words she could immediately understand.

Our purpose is to set the stage for the test. Ordinarily, the Instrumentality Project would require hundreds of thousands of years from start to finish, but this planetary mechanism reduces the time to reset the test to 4,400 years.

This mechanism contains the records of every living creature and human being that walked the previous Earth up until 2,400 B.C.

When this structure is opened in a new world purified by the Great Flood, the preparations for the Instrumentality Project will begin anew.

"You've got to be kidding me! What do you think this is, some role-playing game? You can't keep repeating from the same save file!"

This Ark administers all that data.

"Ark?" Asuka said. "Like from the Bible? That's what this is?"

The torrent of life glimmered as it rushed past her.

The swirl of creatures rose around her, sweeping her up in the current. Her mind began to disassociate again; she lost perception of the boundary between herself and the outside.

"That's what you say, but how can I know if it's really true?"

What is the Ark doing lying in the moon dust? Asuka asked herself.

As her consciousness was swallowed up by the current, in those final moments before she disappeared completely, Asuka lashed out scornfully.

Besides, the data here is missing something.

Birds. There aren't any birds.

But a genuine answer came.

Birds can transcend time and space. They'll cross the vast distance to the newly constructed world.

"A new world?"

The Earth and the moon are two as one, breathing in and out in turn. This moon was the previous Earth, and your Earth was its moon. Now they will trade roles again, and your Earth will give itself over to the moon.

A powerful force suddenly yanked Asuka out from the eddy.

Eva-02 had been melding with the data stream as well and was losing its form, but now an even larger figure seized the Eva roughly and dragged it out.

There was clearly no care or caution in Armaros' movements. The black giant reached into the Ark's stream and forcefully tore Asuka and her Eva from it.

Asuka's vision spun. Just before she was pulled out of the glass structure, the Allegorica unit's rear legs were ripped off at the hip, accompanied by the earsplitting shriek of rupturing metal. Several animals were dragged out along with them. Data, forcibly given form, spilled out onto the uninhabitable environment of the moon's surface.

Very soon all the animals had gone still.

On Earth, Seele, in the Kaji-vessel, said that the Ark rejected sentient beings.

Though railgun shells and moon dust could enter and leave freely, humans—as beings with a consciousness—turned to pillars of salt before they could even get near.

Any approach was rejected. But in another sense, the rejection was a commandment: *Sentient beings shall not touch the Ark* . By approaching with her Eva, Asuka had managed to overcome the Ark's attempts to turn her away. She'd stepped inside and caused turmoil within the data of all creation.

That seemed to have been where she'd gotten herself into trouble. Armaros, the central figure visiting calamities upon the Earth—the giant who'd announced humanity's exit and confined the Earth within the Longinus Curtain—had come to personally rid the Ark of Asuka's infestation.

Armaros hurled Eva-02 into the sky. As the Eva sailed in a parabolic curve, groups of animals emerged from its arm, taking form before disappearing again. The tail fin of a whale emerged from the Eva's back and then circled around to the giant's chest before sinking back under again.

The data from various species had jumbled together inside Unit Two, and the Eva's physical shape was beginning to radically change. Soon, it no longer looked like itself at all.

Just as this misshapen clay doll of an Evangelion was about to crash back down onto the moon's surface, the giant changed form

into a four-legged animal with an arched back and skillfully arrested its low-gravity landing. The Eva howled. Its body had synthesized many different animals, but it mostly resembled a monkey.

"Nein!"

Asuka's voice rang across the gray surface, much like when Armaros had sounded the moon with the end of its spear. But what was her cry rejecting? Was she refusing to meld with the sea of data? Was she repudiating whoever had been tinkering with human history? Whatever it meant, it was the last word she said before she lost herself. And by the time she shouted it, she only faintly understood the significance of the word.

But as she saw the Earth beginning to climb the horizon, a feeling swelled within her, and she couldn't keep from howling.

"Nein!"

Armaros had stolen enough of the Earth's crust to expand the moon to nearly twice its size.

Like a poorly balanced top, the moon's rotation had become increasingly erratic, and its orbit had slid closer to Earth. Now, behind Asuka, the blue sphere climbed a new horizon on what had once been the far side of the moon.

The Earth seemed a little darker through the isolating Longinus Curtain. On the other side, the curtain created a false image, and the moon appeared as the same beautiful goddess it always had. Aside from Asuka, no one was aware of the moon's changes. Maybe one day, the people would realize they were being shown an illusion.

Meanwhile, Asuka watched the Earth from the moon. The planet was dark because it was a reflection of her own consciousness.

But now, that false Earth began to brighten, its blues becoming bluer.

Animals from the Earth teemed on the outer surface of what had once been a Type-2 Eva, and in its womb, and the Earth

brightened from a number of distinct existences.

With the Earth to its back, and its body churning, the Eva rose to its feet…and sprang from the ground.

The force of the jump scattered the regolith like a blossoming flower, and with inhuman movements, the Eva leaped toward Armaros, who stood twice its size. When Asuka had previously sighted the giant, she'd run away because she'd been thinking logically.

But now, she attacked the enemy with no hesitation, acting in pure rage against the inhuman.

"Nein!"

Chapter 46:
Ex-Designated Weapon

WHEN THE EXPERIMENTAL shoulder cannon deployed, the Center Trigonus—Super Eva's window to higher dimensions—began amassing more power, until Shinji's chest felt like it couldn't hold any more.

"What is this?" he asked.

Back when the Eva's S ^{2} Engine had changed form, and most of its mass had slid into the other dimensions, nearly limitless energy had flowed into Super Eva. The Eva and Shinji were reborn, but in exchange, his mother's spirit had faded away.

Power still flowed into Super Eva's chest, where the energy bounced around within the quantum wave mirrors built into the restraint armor. Normally, Shinji could sense energy flowing out to his limbs, but now he felt like the flow had been dammed up, and his heartbeat grew stronger.

The display on the right shoulder weapon's status window switched to a more detailed block diagram; Rei Trois had somehow managed to pull it up—and quickly, too—despite the extraordinary acceleration.

Her eyes ran over the display, and she said, "This…this system. This is no positron cannon. It's designed to harvest the particle stream directly from the Center Trigonus."

The idea didn't sound so far-fetched. For the first time, Shinji read the weapon's designated name—or rather, the knowledge had entered his awareness—EXW-038E.

"Yeah," he said, "I don't think Maya-san would've gotten away with giving us a weapon more powerful than a positron cannon, so she wrote 'Positron Weapon' on the paperwork and gave it some nonsense EX number."

Though Trois could only see Shinji's back, he was clearly in pain.

"Ikari-kun?" she asked with concern.

The sound of Super Eva's pounding heartbeat was like the underside of a waterfall. But Shinji was still holding on as the power built up in his chest. Now that Yui's soul had gone away, Unit One's body was his body.

The Victor on the left came in swinging with its staff. Shinji held the Bizen at a shallow angle, and rather than block the strike, he let the staff scrape down his blade with a shower of sparks—putting his opponent's waist within kicking range. But instead, Super Eva's foot struck the Victor's shield, and the recoil separated them. Without Shinji telling it to, the FCS locked on to the Victor and waited for the enemy to cross into the cannon's line of fire.

But…

"But I don't know what's going to come out of that gun," Shinji said.

For one thing, he didn't know how such a massive volume of energy would be transferred into the cannon. When all that other-dimensional energy underwent quantization, how many digits would be needed to express the number of electronvolts? *Surely more than the waveguide could withstand.*

But while Shinji was thinking, the trigger pulled of its own accord. Swirling within his chest, the tremendous energy leaped to his shoulder, then to the exposed chamber where the A.T. coil contained it for just an instant, and then—

Inside the plug, Rei Trois wasn't able to see the cannon fire.

Whatever projectile it had released immediately caused all the electronics to shut down. But she felt a powerful impact, followed by a pulling sensation. She felt it on her skin, though the sensation came and went with terrific speed.

Shinji saw the weapon fire through Super Eva's eyes. The baryon particles made the quantum jump into the cannon and then rushed out, shattering the weapon into tiny pieces in the process. The projectile emitted an astonishingly powerful gravitational field, so much so that it slightly bent the space around it and destroyed Eva-01's electronics systems, which had been hardened against electromagnetic damage. The projectile flew at almost the speed of

light and struck the Victor's power shield.

In his stretched-out perspective of time, Shinji saw the projectile enter the Victor's chest and destroy the plate on its back.

What just happened?

The shot from the new cannon passed through the enemy's shield as if it weren't even there and struck the Victor's body—although, to be precise, the projectile never actually touched the Victor. Rather, the weapon caused massive proton decay and turned the majority of the enemy's insides into neutrinos, bosons, and a whole lot of heat. Then it went on in the same manner to destroy the plate that marked the Victor as Armaros' kin.

One day, Shinji supposed, he would return to Tokyo-3, where Maya would have been deliberating over what to name the weapon. Shinji couldn't begin to imagine what she might come up with.

The magnetic monopoles destroyed the Victor without being affected at all, and after they passed through, they vanished into the wall of the tunnel that stretched between the portals.

Chapter 47:
Attack on Armaros

BACKED BY TWO REAR PLATES that seemed to grow out from the lunar soil, the black giant Armaros stood among the open hills in front of the Ark. Armaros was prepared to defend against the erratically shapeshifting Eva-02, who was flying straight toward him, when suddenly, the black giant's rear plate shattered. Countless stone-tablet-like fragments scattered into the low gravity, turning to dust before they could hit the ground.

Reeling from this, Armaros absorbed the full force of Eva-02's attack.

Asuka roared like a tiger, and her reddish-black Eva pounced and bit down on Armaros' shoulders with the fangs of a carnivore, tackling the larger giant and toppling him to the ground.

But in that instant, the lunar surface behaved like water. The regolith of dust and rock sprayed in droplets, and then the pair submerged…and vanished.

Chapter 48:
The Other Side of the Window

THE WINDOW VANISHED, and Super Eva was falling into a deep, rocky ravine.

Shinji didn't know what had brought him here—a side effect of the new cannon or the destruction of one of the Victors. *Probably both,* he thought.

Whatever the cause, the distance inside the space tunnel shrank to nothing and he passed through, only to be unceremoniously dumped into a red, rocky ravine carved into an unfamiliar mountain range. The window must have been above the cliffside, and now he was tumbling to the bottom of a gorge.

This is the place I saw on the other side of the window.

Where's the other Victor? What happened to the Angel Carrier I stabbed? Is it dead? Is Trois still inside my chest? I have to find Quatre and her Eva.

Shinji was disoriented. *Where am I?*

He felt utterly exhausted, despite only firing one shot, but he managed to focus his thoughts on flying. He righted Super Eva and touched down on a bluff overlooking the valley.

His shoulder cannon was completely broken, but luckily, that was the worst of it. The blast had killed all of Super Eva's electronic systems. If the Eva hadn't been his own body, he wouldn't have been able to control it at all.

No use dwelling on hypotheticals. Shinji shifted his attention to his present situation. *This place is dangerous. That open window turned people into pillars of salt all across Tokyo-3 and the area around Lake Ashi. The cause is probably that glass structure I saw… Now, where is it?*

The window outside Tokyo-3 was the second place Shinji had seen the Ark; the first was when the hole had opened up during his struggle against Eva Euro-II in Hokkaido. He could vividly remember the revulsion he'd felt upon seeing it.

“There it is.”

The arrangement of smooth glass cubes was half-buried in the bottom of the gorge. Under the bright sunlight, as opposed to the dark nightscape Shinji had observed before, the structure seemed less eerie. But compared to the craggy surroundings, its smooth surfaces felt completely incongruous.

“And what’s with these rock formations? They look oddly like…people? Except they’re bigger than that. More like Evangelions.”

Just then, an explosion sent a cloud of smoke rising from the other side of the mountains to the north. Shinji’s body stiffened.

“What was that? I think I saw something flying.”

Shinji-kun! It’s you, isn’t it?

“Misato-san?!”

The electromagnetic pulse had disabled Shinji’s communicator, but for some time now, he’d been able to pick up weak comm signals through what he perceived as Eva-01’s ears. The first time hadn’t come easy, but lately he could understand most messages on the first try. Subconsciously, he decoded the signal and absorbed the meaning of the message, and his eyes naturally turned in the direction of the transmission’s source.

The gorge continued ahead toward the glass structure, where roughly two kilometers away Misato was a tiny speck, waving to get his attention.

“Misato-san!” Shinji said.

His vision zoomed in. Curled up beside the commander was…

“Kensuke? What’s *he* doing here?”

Aida-kun is hurt. He can’t move. He’s still conscious, but…he’s badly hurt.

“What?” Shinji exclaimed.

Stay calm. You need to be on your guard. Quatre’s Eva and the Euro Eva are fighting right near you.

The systems inside Super Eva’s entry plug remained shut

down, and Ayanami Rei Trois didn't know what was happening outside. She would have expected the plug to be completely dark, but the inner wall adjacent to the Center Trigonus flickered with a green light, and the LCL continued to circulate along with the giant's heartbeat.

Trois curled into a fetal position and wrapped her arms around Shinji's head.

Her mind drifted off. She might have fallen asleep like that—given enough time, she might have even melted inside Shinji—but instead, within her arms, Shinji spoke.

"Ayanami?" he said. "Whoa, it's completely dark in here."

"Ikari-kun?"

He could see her face faintly. She looked perplexed.

Shinji's consciousness had returned to his human body.

"Trois," he said, "we came out the other side of the window. I don't know how or why, but Misato-san and Kensuke are down below."

Shinji opened several panels along the wall of the plug and then spun the handwheel to unlock the exit latch.

"I'm going to carry you in my hand," Shinji said. "Could you go over to them? Apparently, Kensuke is badly hurt, and I'd like you to help him." He added, "Misato-san says that the salt effect doesn't occur around Evangelions, so you'll be fine. Kensuke is also carrying something that keeps him from turning into salt, so if anything happens, stay with him. I know that's a lot to take in at once, but will you do it?"

"Yes," Trois said, after a short pause. "Manual ejection?"

"Yeah, but hold on. I'll have the big one do it. And there's a battle going on out there between Quatre and Euro-II. Put on the armored vest before you go out."

Shinji looked distracted for a moment. "I think the cover is… here."

With a grating sound, Super Eva's hand opened the plug's external cover, and then, with much creaking and groaning, carefully pulled out the entry plug. The LCL drained, the hatch

opened, and bright sunlight flooded the chamber.

"So, I guess this is North Africa," Shinji said. "Can you believe it?"

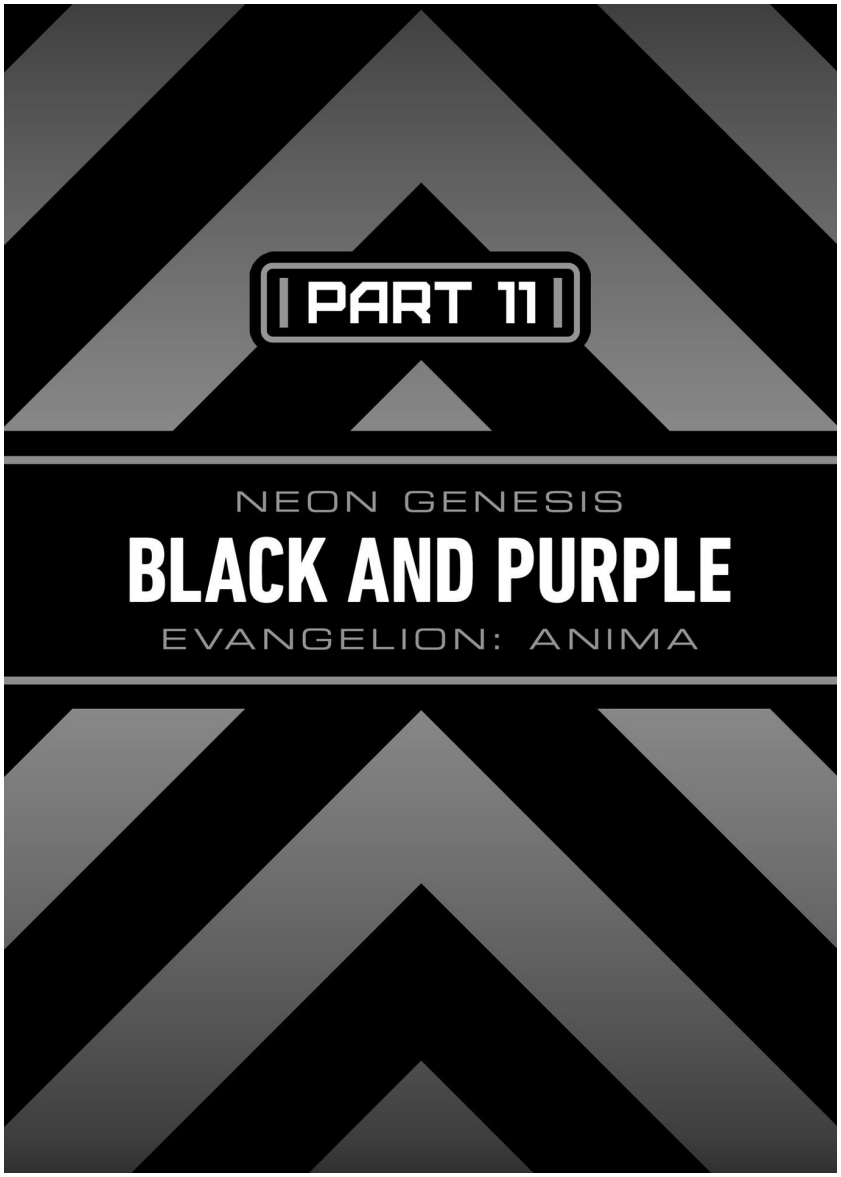
The air was dry and smelled of sand. Trois let out a big cough.

Super Eva knelt in front of Misato and Kensuke on the ravine floor and lowered Trois down to them.

The howl of Allegorica graviton floaters sounded from nearby. The next instant, the sound grew louder. From Super Eva's entry plug, Shinji shouted.

"Euro-II just crossed over the canyon! I think I've been spotted. Hurry up and—"

Something happened on the mesa on the other side of the gorge.


PART 11
NEON GENESIS
BLACK AND PURPLE
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 49:
The Burning Giant

THE WIND WENT completely still, as if it were holding its breath.

Though her senses had been deadened by the hostile, repulsive force that came forth from the Ark and filled the canyon, Misato instantly shrank back. Even Kensuke cowered with fear, and he was already fighting through the excruciating pain of having lost his right arm.

A terrible, awe-inspiring force was coming.

Everyone present held their breath.

High above the canyon, the arid red rock of the mesa burst open like a fountain of water.

Two giant forms leaped out onto the rocks under the blue sky. The ground shook, and the canyon's countless rock formations rumbled and trembled—as if they were afraid.

The giants grappled in combat, the smaller of the two constantly shifting shape as it bit down on the larger like a wild animal.

At first, Shinji thought they were Victor Three and the Angel Carrier, whom he'd failed to dispatch before leaving the spatial tunnel, and that they'd pursued him here. That would have made sense—so much so, in fact, that it took a moment before Shinji realized that the larger giant was not only *not* his first guess, but the last thing he would have expected to see.

The black giant was larger than the Victors and had far more quantum resonance plates. They covered his entire body like scales—or armor. To Shinji's knowledge, only one being fit that description.

"Impossible," he gasped.

Of all the possibilities, this was unquestionably the worst.

“But Armaros was on the moon!”

If Armaros has come to the Earth, then what happened on the moon?

His thoughts raced, and when they landed upon a girl—one with long hair gathered into double ponytails, a bewitching figure, and a confident grin—blinding rage swallowed him. Blood boiled in his veins. And then—

Ayanami Rei Trois was about to drop down from Super Eva’s palm to stand next to Misato and Kensuke.

“Ikari-kun?” she asked.

She looked up at Shinji, who was standing on Super Eva’s shoulder, then followed his line of sight and saw the dreadful turn of events.

“Commander Katsuragi,” Trois said softly. “Three o’clock. On the mesa.”

Misato gasped. On the flat stretch of land between the canyons stood a black giant whose identity was unmistakable—even if he’d lost a wing.

Armaros.

“What?” Misato said. “This can’t be real! Shinji-kun—”

Shinji’s furious yell cut her off. Super Eva’s body—that is, the moving parts visible between the plates of its restraint armor—let out a terrific sound and erupted into flame from the waist up.

“Shinji-kun!” Misato called out.

“Ikari-kun,” Trois said.

Super Eva’s upper body blazed like a giant torch, despite the Eva not containing any flammable components. The intense heat pulled the surrounding air into a vortex.

BATHUMP, BATHUMP, BATHUMP.

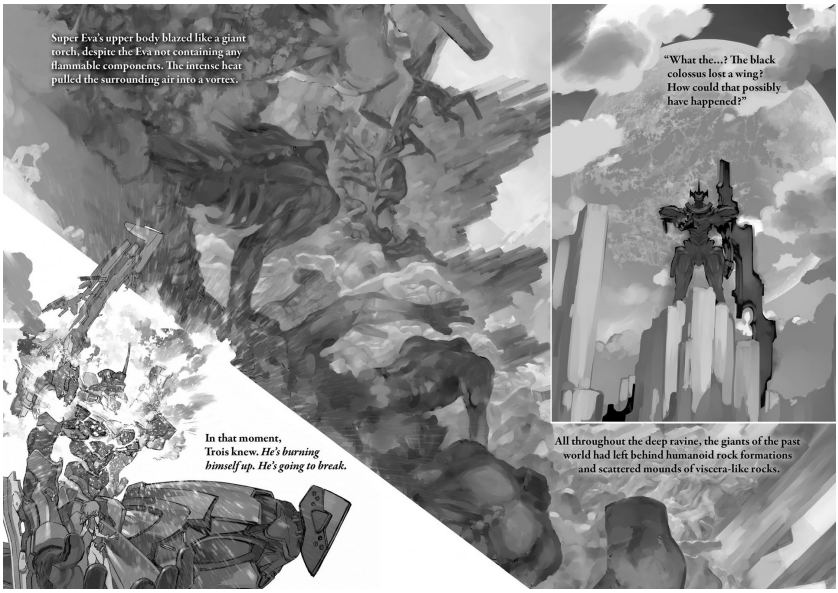
The Center Trigonus emitted fierce waves of energy, and Super Eva’s heartbeat resounded throughout the canyon, demanding to be heard.

Shinji panted, out of breath.

Beyond the blazing flames, Armaros noticed Super Eva's heartbeat and turned.

Super Eva's body creaked and shook with incredible force.

"You shouldn't be here! You have to be on the moon!" Shinji shouted. The fire seemed to have spread to him, too—at least from where Trois watched. At the very least, his expression was ablaze.


Super Eva's upper body blazed like a giant torch, despite the Eva not containing any flammable components. The intense heat pulled the surrounding air into a vortex.
"What the...? The black colossus lost a wing? How could that possibly have happened?"
In that moment, Trois knew. *He's burning himself up. He's going to break.*
All throughout the deep ravine, the giants of the past world had left behind humanoid rock formations and scattered mounds of viscera-like rocks.

Trois was frightened. She'd never seen him like this, nor had she ever wanted to.

Super Eva's hand, upon which she still rode, began to groan with the sound of warping metal.

"Ayanami," Shinji said, "jump down, quick!"

"I don't know…" Rei Trois said. A pulsing, rushing sound came from within Eva-01's hand, as if blood fiercely pumped within.

In that moment, Trois knew. *He's burning himself up. He's going to break.*

"Get down!" Shinji barked.

Trois relented and climbed down from Super Eva's hand. Just as she did—

FWOOM!

Super Eva's hand was ablaze.

Trois reflexively stepped back.

To Trois, Shinji's all-consuming rage appeared to be shutting him away from the outside world.

Without any hesitation, Shinji disappeared into the flaming entry plug.

"You can't be here!" Shinji shouted at Armaros. "You mustn't be here!"

Super Eva's Vertex Wings roared to life, only now the sound had turned harshly dissonant.

"You were on the moon! We sent Cinq and Asuka to the moon to find you, and Cinq died before she could get there. She died!"

Misato shook herself out of her initial shock.

"This is no good," she said. "I need to stop him."

She knew that Shinji would never forgive himself for leaving Asuka to die alone on the moon.

She fumbled for her communicator and shouted, "Shinji-kun! Pick us up. We're evacuating to the Pacific. That's an order!"

But her command was drowned out by Shinji's scream.

"Aaaaahh!"

Super Eva raised its head to the heavens and roared for the first time in its existence.

The mournful wail echoed to the horizon.

The sound waves from the buoyancy field rattled the nearby rocks, and then Super Eva was searing an orange trail through the sky in a straight line toward Armaros.

A powerful wind rushed through the canyon's basin, as if to fill the void Super Eva had left behind. The gale knocked Misato down on top of Kensuke, and Trois tumbled across the ground.

"Trois!" Misato said, covered in sand and dust. "You have to stay by us. You'll turn into a pillar of salt!"

"I'm fine. I'm shielded." In order to ride with Shinji in Super Eva, Trois had put on special gear to keep her own thoughts from contaminating the Eva.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Misato said. "That suit is physical. Technological. But this force is something unnatural."

Trois suddenly stiffened.

"Trois, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Trois said.

But her shielding gear had been ruptured.

When did that happen? she asked herself. *Probably before we arrived here, when Super Eva fired the new weapon and the magnetic forces took down all of its equipment.*

The other giant had stopped grappling with Armaros and was continuing to lose its shape and slow its motions. Armaros turned his complete attention—and his fiercely intimidating gaze—to Super Eva.

The giant's thoughts made themselves known not just to the Ayanamis, into whose minds he'd intruded, but to all around.

< < Those energy waves… Cease thy heartbeat. > >

“Shut up!” Shinji yelled as he flew undeterred toward Armaros.

It was less of an attack than a blind charge fueled by rage and grief. Several kilometers of open ground lay between them, but Super Eva crossed it in an instant. Even then, Shinji was so eager to attack that he swung the Bizen before he’d reached striking range—but the blade’s tip extended, or rather, the A.T. Field encasing the blade extended, to strike Armaros’ shield in a tremendous flash of light.

The blade hit first, followed by Super Eva’s shoulder. Phase light scattered out from where the two shields met, and the shock wave from the impact crashed through the canyon.

Shinji let all his emotions out.

“Why are you here?!” he screamed. “What happened to Asuka?!”

The boundary between them pushed back against the two giants, and they slid along its surface until the force caused them to switch positions.

A second reckless charge caused the remaining parts of the broken cannon to snap free from Super Eva’s right shoulder. But that wasn’t all. The immolating Eva’s autonomous defenses hadn’t been able to fully contain the impact, and the damage had extended into its body.

“You have to be on the moon! Asuka would never have let you escape!”

Violent jets of flame shot from Super Eva’s wounds like spraying blood. But Shinji kept on throwing himself into his enemy.

“Give Asuka back to me!”

Chapter 50:
Ayanami Quatre

QUATRE HAD ARRIVED at the Atlas Mountains with the mutant Eva-0.0 only shortly earlier. Captured in Kaji's arms, she sensed Armaros' arrival and was shaken.

Her Eva flapped its black wings to evade another shot from behind. The positron shell whizzed past, etching fleeting traces of light on its A.T. Field before flying off somewhere above the horizon line.

In pursuit of Quatre was Eva Euro-II, which had a body like Asuka's Eva-02 and Allegorica wings with arrays of graviton floaters. When Quatre's Eva-0.0 had teleported here from Cyprus, the bright white European Eva had kept up the chase.

The situation was disheartening to say the least. Her chest was heavy and full of hurt, both figuratively and literally.

The Q.R. Signum—Armaros' scale—had been fired into her Eva's chest, bringing about rapid, unpredictable changes to the giant's body, and Rei Quatre felt a throbbing, burning pain, as if the scale had been shot into her instead.

"That sound," she intoned, Armaros' thoughts spilling out from her lips. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. "The heartbeat…must not be. The testing ground… The stage… Everyone left on the surface of the Earth…will receive your demise… The Great Flood—"

Quatre grunted with pain. Eva-0.0's arm had attempted to grab the Q.R. Signum out of its chest, only to be blocked by the A.T. Field.

The Kaji-vessel spoke softly into her ear. "That won't work. You can't remove it yourself. Focus on the enemy behind us."

The pair wasn't inside the Eva's entry plug, but standing on its hand in front of the Q.R. Signum.

Eva Euro-II spread its wings and came to a halt in midair, then broke off its pursuit of Unit Quatre and began flying toward

Armaros.

“Why in the world…?” the Kaji-vessel said. Whatever the reason for Euro-II’s behavior, now he’d been given more time to do his work. “Fly us to the Ark. I want to see what’s going on.”

Chapter 51:
The Clashing Giants

ARMAROS EXTENDED HIS ARM toward the charging Super Eva.

The black giant's rear plate changed shape, and a small piece peeled off, shooting in the direction its master's arm was pointing—right at Super Eva. Two more pieces followed in rapid succession.

This was the first ranged attack Armaros had displayed.

Is that a kinetic weapon? Misato wondered.

But when Super Eva evaded the projectiles, something strange happened. Its flames appeared to manifest in the form of another Eva—or, perhaps, a giant-sized human—and separated themselves from it. The effect was as if the Eva's body lagged behind the flames. One of Armaros' projectiles grazed the Eva, snapping off the right side of its armored helmet and the intake on the side of its neck. A moment later, the cast-off body caught up with the flames, and the two were rejoined.

The other three projectiles struck the rock face behind Super Eva, and a beat later, the entire mountain split open, melting from the inside out. Super Eva returned to the attack—but when it swung its arm, the arm of flame reached the enemy first.

Something's not right, Misato thought.

Super Eva had looked like it was burning, but now it appeared as if a separate body of flames was overlapping its real body, and they'd begun to move out of sync.

Kaworu's words echoed in Shinji's mind.

I told you, didn't I?

Once you've left your human vessel, do you really think you can return?

But Shinji didn't hear him. With no regard for the destruction of his lagging body, he kept pressing the attack.

Each time the giants clashed, more fragments of Super Eva's XI-class restraint armor went flying. Super Eva's distinctive A.T. Field, which usually matched the form and movements of its body, had also fallen out of sync and could no longer properly protect it. Meanwhile, its attacks weren't getting through Armaros' powerful A.T. Field-like shield.

Even after losing a rear plate, Armaros was still Armaros. Not even Super Eva could break through a shield powered by the dozens of scales that covered the black giant's body. Relying on nothing but sheer force, Shinji pressed Armaros, shield and all, into the mountain and split a vertical, thousand-meter-deep cleft into the cliff face as he drove the giant all the way down to the base of the canyon.

A dust cloud swept through the valley like a tsunami. When a sudden gust of wind cleared away the cloud, the first to emerge was Super Eva, careening from the cleft and slamming into the opposite cliff face back-first. Stones tumbled, and cracks spiderwebbed the rock wall.

"Give Asuka back to me!" Shinji yelled.

Flames burst out from every crack. As the cliff collapsed behind him, Super Eva stepped forward, spewing jets of flame from its body like lava from a volcano. Then the dust cloud parted, and Armaros reappeared.

A strong wind blew across the mountain range. Clouds gathered above and began to scatter hail.

Chapter 52:
Ayanami Trois

"SHINJI-KUN, WITHDRAW!" Misato shouted. "You need to collect yourself!"

Left behind, Misato couldn't help but feel powerless. She tried to get through to Shinji, but he persisted in ineffectually charging his enemy.

"Trois," she said, "we're heading out. Aida-kun, I need you to try to move."

"I'm not leaving," Trois responded.

Trying to escape from beneath the feet of fighting giants was an exercise in futility. Battles took place over a larger area than typical ground conflicts, but predicting which way the giants would move was difficult and ultimately harder to deal with than even an air raid.

But I have to get us away from here, Misato told herself. *Not for myself but for the children. What was I doing bringing kids into a war? I guess it's a little late for regret, isn't it?*

"Trois!" she called out.

Rei Trois hadn't moved. She gazed vacantly in the direction Super Eva had gone, while standing fully exposed to the force that turned humans into pillars of salt.

She hadn't told Misato that her shielding gear was broken. She didn't want to tell anyone.

It was as if she had been told, *You're nothing but an object that happens to think.*

"I can't save him," Trois said.

"What?"

She spoke aloud, though only to herself. "Even though we all stem from the same soul, Quatre, Cinq, and Six can express their own selves, no matter what form they take. But I can't. I'm not even worth turning into a pillar of salt."

Unsteadily, Ayanami Rei Trois walked away.

“Trois!” Misato called out to her. “Where are you going? You can’t go that way!”

She tried to chase after the girl, but Kensuke couldn’t keep up, and she had to stop.

Instead, she stayed with the wounded boy. When they both looked up again, Trois had vanished between the rocks and the white hail that bounced off of them.

Chapter 53:
Near the Ark

AFTER EURO-II UNEXPECTEDLY broke off its pursuit of her Eva-0.0, Ayanami Quatre had brought the Kaji-vessel as close to the Ark as her Eva could bear.

Still holding her captive in his arms, the Kaji-vessel surveyed the situation and muttered, “Did someone make contact? On the moon side, no less? I just hope the data wasn’t destroyed…”

He turned to look at Quatre, who was wearing a black plugsuit.

“You’re holding up well, puppet,” he said.

After he’d correctly identified Quatre as the manifestation of a deeply buried emotion from her principal, Trois—specifically, *terror*—she’d surrendered total control to him, of herself and her Eva included. She didn’t know if this was a power he possessed as Seele or if the control came from somewhere else. For now, it just was.

Quatre had calmed down considerably from before. She watched the half-buried glass structure slowly spin into and out of the rocks.

“Is that…a projection?” she asked.

“The Ark is split into two existences so that it might survive unharmed throughout eternity. The two parts don’t exist in parallel but rather through a tuning of the probability distribution that renders the Ark impervious to physical interference.”

“But you said someone made contact?”

“The Ark stores the consciousnesses of all living creatures from the very first life, through the birth of civilization, and all the way to the Great Flood. A matching consciousness can touch the Ark—as data, a tool for writing into the memory, a thinking reed. Like a pen.”

Ripples formed on the mirror-smooth surface of the Ark, and the Kaji-vessel clicked his tongue.

BATHUMP, BATHUMP.

From far away, Shinji's heartbeat stirred up ripples in the glass.

"Ikari-kun…" Quatre said, "are you crying?"

Quatre's mutant Eva-0.0 flapped its black wings and took to the sky. Perched atop its shoulder, Quatre and the Kaji-vessel watched Armaros and Super Eva clash.

"What the…" the Kaji-vessel said. "The black colossus lost a wing? How could that possibly have happened?"

Super Eva roared, but it was more mournful wail than wrathful, and Quatre reacted strongly.

"That's laughable," she said. "Ikari-kun, aren't you the one who chose this world?"

While she was under Kaji's control, her expression had remained blank. But now her face broke into a grin, and she began to giggle.

"Heh heh heh. That's funny."

Chapter 54:
Battle of the Gods

THE KAJI-VESSEL HAD SAID that over one hundred Eva had once fought here in the Valley of Human Bodies. The silent forest of giant, statue-like rocks seemed to shout out in unison, though it was just a trick of the ear.

Each time Armaros and Super Eva clashed, a great noise thundered, and a gale rushed through the canyon, between the stone giants and the rocks that looked like spilled viscera, raising a cry to the skies above. Every time that happened, several giant pillars crumbled to dust, as if waking from a terrible dream.

As Misato fled, pounded by hail, buffeted by wind, and dragging along an injured Kensuke, she hardly felt alive.

Had that apocalyptic battle between giants really happened here in another time? If so, then the extraordinary battle behind her was starting to seem like history repeating.

Shinji's baleful wail thundered across the canyon, a voice that wasn't a voice. A signal, not a sound. Shinji's cries filled the Earth, and all who were present listened.

Chapter 55:
At the End of the Road

ATOP THE FLYING EVA, Quatre began to laugh.

She'd been Seele's obedient pilot for Eva-0.0, and the role had freed her from the terror that was her one and only emotion. But now she laughed as if she'd reclaimed herself, and each time Shinji wailed, the sound grew louder.

"Heh heh heh, ha ha ha, HA HA HA!"

As if freed from its shackles, Quatre's Eva-0.0 began making rapid, reckless maneuvers.

"What's wrong?" the Kaji-vessel asked. His arms were still around her.

But everything she'd been keeping buried was now bursting forth; the dam had broken.

"Ha ha ha!" Quatre laughed. " *You* were the one who chose this world!" Her eyes opened wide. "And this is how it ends!"

She looked up and raised her hands aloft.

The black-winged Eva-0.0 flew toward Super Eva and Armaros' battle. When the mutant Eva arrived, it began to circle the fighting pair, passing just overhead, as if mocking them.

"It's been three years since the Instrumentality Project failed!" Quatre said. "You decided, Ikari-kun, that we should all be separate individuals instead of understanding each other. Heh heh!"

Seele was taken by surprise. He shouted into her ear, "Get away from them! We'll get sucked into their fight!"

But with a tight grin and arms spread, Rei Quatre said, "Your ego has sucked everyone into the world you made, Ikari-kun! And what do you have left now? I'll tell you what—despair, just like me!"

Her voice began to crack; she wasn't used to speaking so loud.

And still, she laughed.

Eva-0.0 snagged its wing on a rock ledge and lost balance.

“Control your Eva, puppet!” the Kaji-vessel ordered.

But she wasn’t going to stop now. She laughed and laughed, until her lungs couldn’t take it anymore.

“I—I didn’t want to be the only one in despair! I know what you’re feeling right now. You weep for this absurd reality. So do I. Now we understand each other!”

Unit Quatre crumpled and began to fall. The giant’s wings kept flapping, and their gravity field was still in place, but Quatre had suddenly forgotten how to fly—as if she’d only been dreaming she could and was now waking up.

The Eva’s wings flapped uselessly as the giant began to plummet.

“Enough!” the Kaji-vessel snapped.

Up to this point, Seele had been delivering detached, logical statements through Kaji’s casual speaking manner, but now, he’d finally lost his temper. He grabbed Quatre’s chin and roughly turned her head sideways to look her in the eye. She kept her grin. Her eyes were unfocused. She was like a puppet whose strings had been snapped.

Seele clicked his tongue. “There’s no reasoning with a thing that won’t listen. Useless toy.”

“We…understand each other…”

Having said all she wanted to say, having seen all she wanted to see, she broke completely.

As her scarlet eyes stared off into the distance, tears began to fall.

Clinging to the shoulder of the plummeting Eva, the Kaji-vessel shouted to Armaros.

“Black colossus! Surrogate! Don’t you understand? Stop that heartbeat! That pulse is rattling the consciousnesses inside the Ark. They’re resonating with it! They’re going to lose their form!”

The origins of this calamity had begun three years after the

Battle at Nerv HQ, starting with Quatre's Eva-0.0, and then Ayanami Rei Quatre herself. After being implanted with Armaros' Q.R. Signum, Quatre was emotionally shattered by terror—the terror of being corrupted by an unknown entity while in the solitude of orbit and the terror of losing her link with the other Ayanamis, who together shared a single soul. Her brokenness led to despair, which continued to this day.

Her Eva plummeted at an angle toward the base of the deep canyon. By the time the ground came near, the giant had stopped even attempting to right itself.

The Eva's knees scraped the ground, and then the giant was barreling through the human-shaped rocks—the Evas of the past world—shattering them, until it finally slowed to a stop and planted its shoulder on the ground.

Chapter 56:
The Observers

"WHAT'S HE DOING?" Kensuke asked.

Misato, who was dragging Kensuke through the canyon, saw it, too.

On the far side of the gorge, where Shinji was throwing himself recklessly into battle with Armaros, the black colossus raised his hand to the sky and pointed.

Misato looked in the direction Armaros was pointing. Far above, a thread of light raced through the sky.

"Where's he pointing?" she asked. "At the lance?"

Most people had taken to calling the lance's current manifestation the Longinus Ring. The lance had stretched into a thin band of light, visible even in the daytime, that traveled at ninety kilometers per second. When the lance's tip was overhead, the band of light extended beyond the horizon, and the tail wasn't visible; it was somewhere on the opposite side of the globe.

The lance was growing longer as it circled the Earth. Presently, the band had reached 28,000 kilometers, well over half the Earth's circumference. Though no one knew for sure, most planetary

physicists, geologists, and the scientific community at large agreed—once the lance formed an uninterrupted ring, the world would end. The lance's length had come to represent a final countdown.

And there, directly above the Valley of Human Bodies, the lance's tip stopped.

The entire sky seemed to split open.

"The sky is splitting," Misato said with a gasp. "Or…melting?"

Far above, the barrier appeared like a thin layer of clear ice silently shattering, its pieces sinking and vanishing into deeper

waters.

“Could it be?” Misato said. “The Longinus Curtain is disappearing?”

What’s happening? she wondered.

The shattering was oddly beautiful. The break spread like a chain reaction from west to east. On the eastern side, the pale moon hung low between the clouds, and when the sky shattered there, all of humanity felt a small but noticeable tug in that direction. A new and very large force had begun acting on the Earth.

“What’s that?” Kensuke asked.

Behind the crumbling image of the moon loomed something bright and large.

It was daytime on Cyprus, but the object was *so* bright and *so* large that it might have cast shadows on the land.

Dominating an entire corner of the sky was a moon— *the* moon, but swollen to twice the size of the moon they’d always known.

Chapter 57:
The Lance of Longinus

BUT THE MORE IMMEDIATE CONCERN wasn't the Curtain's vanishing but rather the stilled lance.

The Curtain lifted because Armaros had assigned the lance a different task.

From the ground, the Lance of Longinus appeared to have frozen in orbit 20,000 kilometers above northern Africa, but appearances were deceiving. Without altering its speed at all, the lance's tip had changed direction and was now traveling straight down toward the Earth. Had the long-range communications or the backup relays still been operational, the group on the ground might have noticed earlier. As it was, they only realized what had happened after the fact.

The lance dove toward Africa at ninety kilometers per second. From far below, the relic appeared still, and by the time it was close enough for its descent to be noticed, it was too late to do anything about it. Shinji alone had time to react. In a flash, he raised his SRL Bizen, but it didn't matter.

The Bizen's blade shattered, and the vertical thread of light skewered Super Eva, passing through the chest and out the back.

Shinji saw it all happen within time compressed to less than an instant.

The twin tines of the lance scooped the Center Trigonus—Super Eva's heart—from its chest.

The pain, the indescribably excruciating pain, came a moment later.

"Aaaahhhh! Aaaahh! Aaahh! AAAAaaahhh!"

Shinji's screams wouldn't stop.

"Aaaah! Aah! Aaaahhh! AAAhhhhh! Ahh!"

And the lance was absurdly long. 28,000 kilometers long. Even at 90 kilometers per second, its entirety would take more than

fifteen whole minutes to pass through.

Super Eva tried to grasp the lance with both hands and stop it. But the lance's energy reacted to the A.T. Field on Super Eva's hands, sparks cascading violently. The weapon's momentum was too staggeringly great to be halted. Under the Eva's feet, the ground swelled from the force of the passing lance and then burst all at once. But Super Eva, still impaled, was helpless against it. The lance pressed the Eva into the bottom of a deep crater, and Shinji's screams continued without end.

About that time, the Lance of Longinus's tip pierced through the opposite side of the Earth. It was night on the western Pacific when the lance vaporized New Zealand's North Island. The band of light continued moving directly upward into space, and when it reached its previous altitude of 20,000 kilometers, the weapon turned sharply again and resumed its orbit, this time without hiding the moon behind a false image.

Shinji's heart had been taken from him.

With the breaking of the Longinus Curtain, the people of Earth saw for the first time what had become of the real moon.

On Earth's night side—in and around Russia, Asia, and Australia—the situation seemed the most dire. The light of the shattering sky appeared far more intense, and the moon suddenly loomed gigantic and ferocious, with countless glowing red cracks spiderwebbing its shaded side. Panic broke out simultaneously in every region.

The moon is falling!

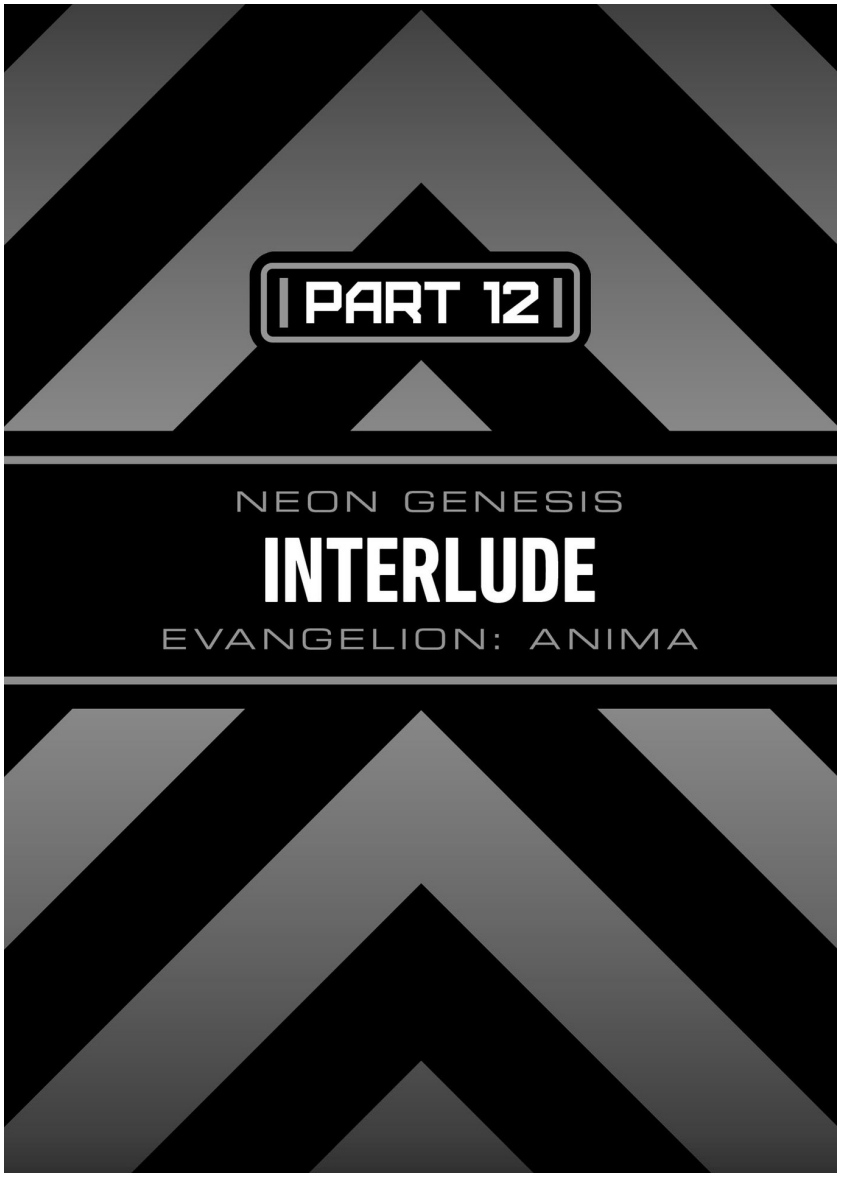
Or so it seemed to everyone who saw, and they weren't entirely wrong. The moon's orbit was now 290,000 kilometers from the Earth and closing. Not only that, the moon had expanded with the material the Lance of Longinus was stealing from the Earth's crust. The result was a sight dreadful enough to strike terror into the heart of any observer.

The idea that a person could look at the moon and be driven mad was a commonly held folk belief shared across many cultures throughout history. Tonight, the legend became real, and cities

erupted into riots with damage rivaling that of war.

The people near the equator didn't notice the more direct physical threat that was coming toward them. All eyes were on the moon instead of the sea rising as tall as a mountain.

A high tide was coming, the likes of which had never been seen.


PART 12
NEON GENESIS
INTERLUDE
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 58:
Interlude

ACTING DEPUTY COMMANDER Toji Suzuhara hadn't known where the Hakone window would take Super Eva, but he hoped that since Trois was with Shinji, he wouldn't do anything rash. Now he wished he hadn't let Shinji go.

The pilot hadn't reported in—which meant he'd likely been sent somewhere outside transmission range. The telecommunications networks were in worse shape than Toji had realized.

He hadn't recognized the view from the other side of the portal. This last time, the other side had been sunny—midday. The craggy mountains in the background hadn't offered much in the way of landmarks, but they had provided shadows. By measuring the angle of the incoming sunlight, the technicians had narrowed the possible location down to a ring-shaped area centered in the Atlantic Ocean, which meant it could have been in Europe, Africa, or even part of South America. Without knowing where, Toji couldn't send anyone else after Super Eva.

An interesting piece of outside information provided a possible hint. The European military was redeploying with extreme haste from the Mediterranean to northern Africa.

So, is he in Africa?

The only other transmissions were cries for help from one disaster or another, of the sort that were occurring everywhere across the globe. The airwaves were filled with more and more people turning to prayer, which was only natural. But Armaros' voice had been heard all over the world, and more than a few had been taken in by his words. No matter the cause, the widespread breakdown of terrestrial communication was inconvenient, especially now that the satellites had gone dark.

When daybreak came, opinions were divided on how to handle recovery operations in Hakone. Toji Suzuhara and his aide, Fuyutsuki, were spending the early morning reexamining the

options.

The acting deputy commander was worried about Shinji—actually, he was worried about a lot of people and a lot of things. He decided to bring up the message the JSSDF Akashima's pilot had delivered.

"You mean how they want to move the seat of government to Tokyo-3?" Fuyutsuki asked. "I'm not sure what to think about that. But the land inside the caldera is UN leased territory, so I suppose it's like a landlord kicking out his tenant, or maybe they'll just want us to move to the edge and make room in the center."

"But…" Toji protested. "We get attacked here, and fairly often, wouldn't you say?"

"They think they can lure the enemy away with that fake heartbeat. But I'm not sure how much of their story is authentic. I have a feeling they're still making up their minds about the move, too."

As he spoke, Fuyutsuki went down the list of unresolved matters for the recovery efforts. The majority were tagged URGENT, and he quickly untagged them.

Whoa, he's merciless, thought Toji, who tended to deliberate endlessly over each and every measure. The indecision often caused delays.

"If they're really going forward with this move," Toji said, "it's going to have serious implications. This isn't like when Tokyo-3 was contained on top of the Geofront. The city surrounds our HQ. Plus, you've got the fortified districts, and then everywhere else is at capacity with Nerv staff and the civilians and businesses that support us."

"You're right," said Fuyutsuki. "So, do you think we instruct the Japanese government that they can set up camp in Gora to the west and in the northern part of the alluvial fan that got filled in when Mount Kami collapsed? That could work, but I don't think they'll like being confined to camps when the city's right there…"

Fuyutsuki looked like he'd just remembered something.

"You have to understand," he said, "the Japanese government throws out these kinds of requests every now and then. What would

you do if, say, they wanted us to incorporate Eva Euro-II into Nerv Japan?"

"Huh?" Toji balked. *Where in the heck did that come from?* "No, we *fought* Euro-II in Hokkaido. And then the European planes got caught in that plague of locusts and crashed all over the mountains. Come on, you don't seriously think that's a possibility, do you?"

But of course, no matter how ridiculous that notion seemed, Toji couldn't help but think of Hikari—Euro-II's pilot.

Toji suspected that Fuyutsuki was needling him. *Maybe that's how old people like to add spice to their conversations.*

"I don't know about that," Fuyutsuki said. "On a structural level, that whole incident was an internal conflict between two divisions of the United Nations—and one that entangled the militaries of several different countries. Someone has to take responsibility and fix this situation. The UN split up Nerv in the name of restoring order; there's a nonzero chance they'll decide to join us back together."

Toji realized that the old man was trying to teach him something, so he stopped his work and listened.

"Besides," Fuyutsuki continued, "the Europeans may have stolen our technology, but without the proper manufacturing resources, they're stuck with the Eva components they already have. If Euro-II comes, it'll come with a lot of crew—including engineers."

And that could be beneficial. Toji had trouble accepting that Hikari was piloting an Eva that had once nearly killed him, but if it meant she could come home, then—

Wait.

"Uh… Couldn't they try to take us over from the inside without a fight?"

Fuyutsuki smiled. He liked hearing Toji give an answer that reflected the duty of his station.

"That's right," the older man said. "It's possible they might not settle for taking our knowledge but hijack our organization instead."

Toji grumbled as he returned his attention to the relief efforts.

When Super Eva disappeared through the spatial gate that had been opened by Victors Two and Three, Ayanami Rei Six was piloting the Type-F Eva-00. She was tasked with finding the remains of the Angel Carrier that Shinji had barreled through on his way to the gate. The operations lasted late into the night, and it was more than Six's roughly six-year-old body could handle.

That night—last night—the tuning room staff had recovered her from the entry plug, where the exhausted girl had been curled up like a cat, and put her in bed.

When morning came, she appeared before the primary staff in the command center, who'd either been up all night or taken only meager naps. Looking perfectly rested, she gave them a cheerful, "Morning!"

"It must be nice to be so young and able to recharge so quickly," Toji remarked.

"We all could say the same about you, Deputy Commander," a nearby technician said. "I don't know how you're still standing."

"Believe me, I'm beat," Toji said with a dry chuckle.

Six grabbed his pant leg. "I hear a rumble coming from below."

Toji's expression grew more serious, and he turned to look at the main screen.

"Excuse me," he said to a technician. "Put the environmental data on the display." Then he added, "Um, it's been twenty-three hours since you slept, hasn't it?"

A timetable log appeared on the screen and quickly rewound. The technician scrolled too far, and the log automatically closed.

"I got it," said a technician from the middle deck below. "According to the Magi system, it's volcanic gases."

Though the Hakone caldera didn't have any natural hot springs, large volumes of sulfuric gas and other gases vented in various locations; the local bathhouses used steam from those vents to boil their water.

Toji looked over the data and said, "It looks like the gases are coming out to the southeast…near where Owakudani used to be. They're coming from the south, but I don't think we need to worry

about that, right?"

The technician who'd accidentally scrolled past the log data offered a defeated grin. "These kinds of minor gas movements happen all the time, what with the four-ton Evangelions stomping around. Frankly, I'm impressed she noticed such a small, low-frequency vibration at all. We could be lying down and still easily miss it."

Toji patted Six on the head. "Nice going, Zashiki-warasix."

She scowled.

Of all the Ayanamis, Six was by far the most expressive.

It was no coincidence that, three years ago, all the Eva pilots had been fourteen years old.

A pilot's brain development directly affected their synchronization rate. The peak was thought to come at age fourteen. Shinji and the others had now passed that age, but through a combination of experience and artificial equipment, they'd attained far higher synchronizations than at their supposed peak. Still, that would likely only last so long.

Six had been purposefully removed from her artificial womb before reaching peak age.

Part of the assumption had been that the brain and body were simply vessels, and if a seventeen-year-old consciousness was put inside, she would think and act like a seventeen-year-old. But that wasn't how it worked.

Differences emerged between intellectual memory and muscle memory. The younger the mental age, the more her thought processes were affected. Those differences were supposed to have been balanced out by linking the four Ayanamis together. No one had expected the girls would manifest individuality and distinctive personalities.

For Six, that meant a superior capacity for concentration but only for short periods of time. She was good at making quick judgments but poor at thoughtful deliberation.

"Begin a structural inspection of the tunnels near the

underground transport system leading to the Mount Komagatake sniping post," Toji barked at a technician, "and perform maintenance as needed."

With that, the discussion was over, and a bored-looking Rei Six left the command center.

That was another of her unique traits. She was the only Ayanami who ever got bored. Outside the command center doors, three Type-N brain activity monitoring robots were twirling in circles waiting for her.

One robot had been assigned to Six, and the others were to monitor Cinq and Trois. With two Ayanamis absent, their robots had been left behind so that the machines could maintain communication with each other. When they did, they tended to group together like this.

As Six walked away, the three robots followed after her in a line.

Outside of Nerv HQ, Tokyo-3 was busy as usual. A large force came and destroyed, and the people rebuilt. That old familiar cycle had begun again after a three-year absence. The people couldn't pack up and escape to somewhere else, because Lilith was here. Meanwhile, the rest of the world continued to provide the resources necessary to repeatedly rebuild and remake Tokyo-3 because the global community recognized the benefit in concentrating all the damage in one place, rather than spreading potential targets across the globe.

Six and the three robots put the city and its ceaseless construction behind them and went to Lake Ashi's shore.

There, Six craned her diminutive neck and saw a man sitting on the cliffside, fishing.

Beside him, a large dog had sprawled out on the rocks and was looking in the same direction as its master.

Six thought for a moment and then called out to the man.

"You must not be from around here," she said. "If you're trying to blend in, you should have just stuck with the dog. There're

no fish in this lake."

Clearly, Ayanami Six wasn't the little girl she appeared to be. But then again, risking trouble like this for the sake of a little diversion wasn't the kind of decision or action a seventeen-year-old would make, either.

The man yelped in surprise. "You startled me."

He and his dog—a golden retriever—turned to look at her. Almost predictably, he wore a blue baseball cap and sunglasses.

Six's interest immediately shifted to the dog. She held out her hands in front of her chest. The dog considered her and then looked to its master.

He smiled and said, "Azuchi, say hello."

Azuchi rose. The dog was bigger than Six, and all at once, the three N-Type robots hid behind the girl's back in single file. The group formed an odd lineup—giant dog, Six, robot, robot, robot.

Don't be afraid, another girl might have told herself, but not Six. She let Azuchi sniff her and then stroked the dog's cheek with her little hands. The big dog was soon at the small girl's mercy.

To the dog, Six said, "I'd run away from here if I were you. Trouble's coming."

The man replied. "Oh? What do you mean? Like a cop or somethin'?"

"No. There's something underground."

The man set down his fishing pole, crossing his legs as he sat on the cliffside. He said, "You ought to tell a grown-up to look into it."

"They're all busy," Six replied. "I could even do it myself. If it was another Rei, like Trois, they'd give me remission," she said, tripping on the word, "to go out by myself."

" *Permission* to go out, you mean," he corrected. "So, what do you think you should do about it, er…Miss…?" He pointed at her.

"Six," she filled in.

"Six! What do you think you should do?"

"I should put vibration sensors on these robots, for one."

The N-Type robots had rock-paper-scissored for priority and were now fishing with the man's rod.

Six continued. "And investigate with the Eva."

"Whoa. That sounds serious."

"Unit Zero's other sensors are better than its sight."

"I see," the man said. "Azuchi, come."

Six didn't want the dog to go, but the man had called it back because the dog had been dotted by several laser sights. Apparently, someone had finally noticed that an Eva pilot was in contact with a suspicious individual, and snipers had been put into position. From the juddering movement of the laser dots, the snipers were probably a thousand meters away in the HQ's tower. Security officers would be coming soon.

"Easy. Easy now."

The man was gone in a flash, and he managed to throw the security and intelligence agents off his trail. When Six returned to HQ, she was met by Toji, who was shouldering a large-caliber anti-material rifle (so called because they were only used against equipment—a big, fat lie told by every country). He was about to lead her to the interrogation office for a stern scolding when an alert sounded.

In the command center, Fuyutsuki ordered the alert to be downgraded to a warning. "No cause for alarm," he said. "We're all friends here."

Alarmed, Toji rushed into the command center. "Fuyutsuki-sensei, report!"

"The JSSDF Akashima is crossing over the caldera's rim again," Fuyutsuki said.

The mechanized giant's tank-like bulk came in and out of view over the ridgeline to the south of Lake Ashi. Last night, Nerv had allowed the intrusion…but that was last night.

"We've received no advance notice," Hyuga reported. "Nothing."

“Ask them what they think they’re doing,” Toji said. “Get through to someone at Matsushiro, too!”

Without knowing why the mecha was on the move, the command center had been thrown into confusion. After all, the JSSDF had assaulted Nerv in the past; Nerv couldn’t afford to turn a blind eye.

“Is there any other movement from the JSSDF forces?”

“Just disaster relief operations,” Hyuga said, “and that’s in another prefecture altogether.”

Toji couldn’t read their intentions.

“Six, get to the cage,” Toji ordered. “I’m sending Unit Zero Type-F to the sniping post.”

The girl noticed something she hadn’t seen in the nighttime. Now that it was bright out, she saw a small design on the mecha’s armor—a squad insignia, maybe. The design was of a dog. Six made a small noise of recognition.

“What?” Toji asked. “Did you notice something?”

“Nope. It’s nothing,” Six replied, running for the elevator.

“Leave those monitoring robots,” Toji called out. “You aren’t gonna need them!”

But the girl and the robots had already bounded through the closing elevator doors.

< < Command center to Unit Zero—you don’t have to do anything more than keep Akashima in check, > > Hyuga said.

“Unit Zero Type-F, Six acknowledged.”

Walking on one real leg and the large metal post that had replaced the other, Eva-00 moved onto the platform that would carry it at high speed through the underground tunnels and knelt down to anchor itself in place.

“Locks engaged.”

< < The route to the Komagatake Sniping Post is green. > >

“Launch!”

Six's little body pressed back into her seat as all 3,560 metric tons of her Eva launched toward the south.

From the command center, the Nerv staff oversaw the takeoff of an unmanned, four-meter-long, pusher-prop helicopter to try to get a picture of the JSSDF's movements, but aside from that, no new information came in. The general mood in the room was perplexed.

Fuyutsuki said, "What was the name of the man who contacted us from the Akashima last night?"

Toji thought for a second. "Endo, was it?"

Fuyutsuki nodded. "And now he's back. From the way he spoke, I didn't take him for the kind of guy who'd recklessly try to provoke us."

An alarm sounded. Startled, Toji and Fuyutsuki both turned and looked up at the main screen, where the map switched from the deployment status of the city's fortified districts to a traffic map.

Some of the underground tunnels were marked in red.

"Unit Zero," Toji said, "get off that platform!"

< < What? Why? > >

A camera inside the tunnel swiveled to show the conveyance platform, which had completed an emergency stop. There, absurdly small in the middle of the platform, was a single, N-type robot, looking like a rice cooker with arms and legs.

Toji nearly fell over, but he managed to say, "Unit Zero! Six, are you okay?"

< < Fine and dandy, thank you! > >

Hyuga read the telemetry data aloud. "Pilot vitals normal. No damage to the Eva."

That was a relief, at least. But then the technician watching the outside camera said, "Akashima has crossed the ridge into the caldera!"

"Here we go!" Toji said, and the command center bustled with the anticipation of violence. But tempers quickly settled, and the room fell silent as the staff watched the Akashima through the exterior video feed.

“What the hell is he doing?” Toji remarked.

Akashima had crossed the ridgeline—only to sit down on it, looking toward Nerv HQ with a posture resembling a sleepy spectator in the outfield bleachers.

Toji groaned. “Is everyone out of their minds?”

But then Aoba shouted something that once again changed the mood.

“Abnormal heat readings on the southern wall of the Geofront! Be careful, Unit Six, it’s right by you!”

Eva-00 Type-F found an opening to the next level down and jumped. The floor below collapsed under the giant’s weight, and the Eva crashed through to the Geofront’s ground level. Just ahead, the wall glowed bright red with heat.

It shattered. And out came—

“Sandalphon! The larva!” Toji said, watching the feed. “I thought the larva died along with its Carrier!”

It wasn’t an unreasonable assumption. When killed, Angel larvae inside the Carriers’ cocoons didn’t burst into cross-shaped phase explosions as their adult versions had. They simply disintegrated, and no larva had developed far enough to establish a core.

Without a Carrier to furnish energy, it was hard to imagine a larva could survive for long.

Fuyutsuki put Maya on the screen.

“Ibuki-kun,” he said, “What’s your take on what we’re seeing?”

< < We first discovered Sandalphon within the magma of Mount Asama. If we assume that the Angel shares a significant biological connection with geothermal energy… > >

“Mount Hakone is also a volcano,” Toji said. “Are you telling me that thing can’t die as long as it’s here?”

As evident from the large volume of volcanic gases spewing forth, Mount Hakone was not an extinct volcano.

But neither was it a volcano with shallow conduits of magma that could lead to frequent eruptions.

Just to the north of Hakone, the Philippine Plate jutted into the North American Plate like a pointed finger, and the fault lines ran up the fingertip like a split nail.

The Hirayama Fault extended from the north of Hakone, and the Tanna Fault from the south. Each fault split east and west, forming a rhombus-shaped deformation of the ground (called a pull-apart basin) at Mount Hakone. The tectonic movement periodically opened up new fissures above the magma chambers, which could cause a steam-blast eruption, or even induce the whole volcano to swell.

When the first seismic surveys of that geological battleground revealed the large, egg-shaped hollow that was the former Geofront, the geologists thought the hollow was a small caldera formed by a collapsed lava dome in some earlier era. But upon excavation, the presence of the unnaturally smooth walls suggested the space had been formed by Lilith, who was buried in its center.

In short, though humans had unearthed the former Geofront, Lilith was the one who'd constructed the hollow. It wouldn't have made any sense for humanity to go to the extreme expense and effort to construct a space large enough for an entire underground city at a place where the tectonic plates clashed.

And now that same Lilith had created a black, spherical space where time stood still and had retreated within it. Like the Geofront, the sphere was egg-shaped, too—a fact that hadn't gone unnoticed.

Sandalphon, the Angel of volcanoes, had arrived at the egg sleeping in the bosom of the volcano.

"This is Unit Six, commencing fire."

Unit-00 Type-F had no right arm or leg; they'd been removed in favor of the Angel's Backbone weapon system. By integrating the baryon cannon with the Eva's body, the giant could drive the weapon with its A.T. Field—the primary advantage was its phase-shifted A.T. Erosion Field, which could pierce the target's Field and cause it to collapse. That gave the weapon its other alias, the Field

Piercer.

One direct hit would bring the battle to an immediate end, but this particular match-up was the worst-case scenario for the Eva. With only one leg, Eva-00 Type-F had poor mobility, while Sandalphon was comparatively nimble.

The Angel leaped toward Eva-00, and Six fired. The shot blasted through the many-layered ceiling and up into the sky.

Using its long arms skillfully, the Angel easily evaded the Eva's fire and hurled a ball of flame at it. The surrounding temperature quickly rose.

Eva-00 raised its left arm to shield its face. The fireball burned its arm, and Six cried out.

Her face twisted in pain, but Six swung the Backbone to put Sandalphon in her sights. The long barrel, lined with Field-based accelerators, was usually a strength; but right now, the cannon's length was all disadvantage. She couldn't keep up with the Angel's movements.

Pain came again, and this time, it stole her breath away. Sandalphon had burned her back.

Wheezing, she said, "It hurts…"

The Type-F Eva's movements were slowing. Showing no mercy, Sandalphon proceeded destroying its restraint armor with its fireballs.

In the command center, the Nerv staff were beginning to panic, unsure of what to do.

"Unit Zero still has a left arm!" Fuyutsuki shouted. "Can't we deliver it any close-quarters weapons?"

Toji was also getting flustered. He knew he had to do something, but he wasn't sure what. "Maybe the fortified districts could blast open a tunnel to her with surface-to-surface weapons."

Calm down! Toji told himself. *Soryu already defeated this Angel in its larval state, didn't she? According to the combat records…*

"That's it!" Toji exclaimed. "Coolant! What about water? A fire hydrant!"

But Aoba shook his head apologetically. "There's a supply

station with fire suppression equipment two levels up, alongside the transport rails, but because of draining issues, it's only equipped with foam and carbon-dioxide-based extinguishers."

Sandalphon continued making a plaything out of the slower Eva.

"All I need to do is hit the dang thing once!" Six whined.

The temperature had continued to rise. It was hard to say if the Angel was creating the heat directly or pulling up steam from the depths of the volcano, but either way, Eva-00's performance was beginning to suffer. Sooner or later, the heat would be more than the Eva could withstand.

"It hurts," she said. "It hurts…and I want ice cream…"

The command center staff nervously watched the telemetry data coming in.

Eva-00's body was taking damage. Of greatest concern was its left leg, where the wounds and fatigue were most heavily concentrated. Once the Eva's leg was immobilized, the giant would be dead in the water.

This is bad, Toji thought. He wanted to tell Six to escape, but her opponent was faster. Sandalphon would easily overtake her.

"Six!" he said. "Be careful not to let the enemy circle to your left. You can't aim your cannon that direction."

But that advice was hardly going to turn the tide.

Isn't there anything better I can offer? Toji clenched his fists. *Shit! This happened because I didn't listen to what she was telling me. 'Cause I have a little sister, I'm used to ignoring kids. I fell into that pattern of thinking.*

Unprompted, Fuyutsuki said, "What's the structure like underneath us right now?"

Aoba replied, "It's…not as compartmentalized as it used to be. We basically have the aboveground levels, and we occupy the next two levels down. Third and fourth are sealed off, and the fifth is the basin of the old Geofront."

“Really? We use all the way to the third? Oh, because the outer ring uses the old underground transport rails, right? So, basically, we don’t have any personnel on levels two and below.”

What the heck is he going on about? Toji wondered.

Then it came to him. But the idea left him speechless.

Seeing Toji turn pale, Fuyutsuki said, “The cleanup will be hard, I know, but just think—we’ll have a new view to enjoy. And we have the perfect method to do the digging.”

Come on, old man!

< < Aaaaaiiee! > >

Six’s left leg was done. She’d lost all hope.

As her Eva staggered back and began to topple over, Toji shouted, “Six! Blast a hole through the south-southwestern wall! Try to avoid the support columns as best you can, but give it your full power!”

The Eva’s breaker system had already switched off the feedback from the left leg, but the terrible pain remained in Six’s brain. She was about to break down and cry, but Toji’s forceful shout snapped her out of it, and she fought back the tears.

As her Eva continued to topple, Six held out against the pain. She closed one eye, aimed the crosshairs where Toji had told her, and unleashed her cannon at full blast.

VWOOM!

The cannon roared, and dust flew as an intricately colored beam of phase light, like a tunnel made from shards of broken glass, shot off to the south and propelled the glittering baryon projectile.

The shock wave shook the ground all the way to the surface; all of Tokyo-3 felt it.

Not paying any heed to where the missed shot had gone, Sandalphon leaped toward the fallen Eva.

That was when it happened.

The front end of a surging wave of water slammed into Sandalphon’s side and swept the Angel away.

Inside the JSSDF Akashima, Endo was strapped in tight to his harness (it was regulation, so he didn't have a choice) as he watched Lake Ashi through the observation unit. But then he noticed something strange happen to the lake.

Reflexively, he lifted his sunglasses. A water vortex had formed on the lake's northern side.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," he said. "What did you do?"

Lake Ashi's water flooded into the former Geofront with tremendous force, scattering—and then submerging—everything in its path.

Just as the Angel's Backbone had been strong enough to destroy multiple mass-production Evas in the Battle at Nerv HQ, so too was the weapon powerful enough to drill through the volcanic strata all the way to Lake Ashi in a single shot.

The lake water was too cold for the larval Sandalphon to overcome, and as had happened to its previous incarnation, the Angel disintegrated in an explosion of steam.

By the time the recovery team lifted slumbering Eva-00 Type-F out from the water, and fished up the three N-Type robots with a landing net, the former Geofront had been completely filled. Nerv Japan and Tokyo-3 now rested atop a gigantic underground lake.

On that day, Lake Ashi lost much of its water, and here and there the bottom of the lake had surfaced.

Word arrived that a massive tsunami was coming north from the South Pacific.

PART 13

NEON GENESIS

EVA-02'S CALL

EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 59:
After the Battle

ARMAROS APPROACHED the Ark, and the congregation of black, mirrorlike cubes slowly moved, seeming to follow after the giant.

He began to sink back into the ground, apparently setting forth on another instantaneous journey through the root-like tunnels that linked one place with another. As if being dragged along, the Ark, too, sank into the rocks.

Now that the Ark's location had been discovered, Armaros left to take it somewhere else.

After the Lance of Longinus blasted a crater into the valley, dust and sand had filled the air. It was taking its time settling. Kensuke leaned on Misato, who had to feel her way forward from rock to rock.

"At least that strange, repelling force is gone," she remarked.

The Ark had denied human approach and turned Kensuke's right arm into crumbling salt. The intense pain clouded his senses on the whole right side of his body, but now that the Ark's force was gone, walking came a little bit easier.

I guess it's time, Kensuke thought.

Just then, a large rock formation toppled over—maybe it had been damaged in the fight—and Misato and Kensuke dodged the falling stones just in the nick of time. Now they were separated.

Kensuke grunted in pain and shouted, "Commander Katsuragi?"

"I'm fine," came a reply. "What about you, Aida-kun?"

With his remaining arm, Kensuke reached into a pocket of his tactical vest and retrieved a small, thin, hard case and tossed it to the other side of the fallen rocks toward Misato's voice.

"Aida? What's this?" she asked.

“Take it back with you to Hakone, Commander. This is where we part ways.”

“What are you talking about?” she said. When he didn’t answer right away, she prodded, “Aida-kun?”

“I believe that’s what shielded me from the Ark’s power. The Europeans called it orichalcum. Can you believe that? But get this… when I analyzed the metal, it tested as ordinary lead.”

Kensuke’s voice receded into the distance. Misato had intended on bringing him back with her.

“Wait!” she said, sounding nonplussed. “What do you think you’re going to be able to accomplish in your condition?”

“I’ll be in touch.”

That was the last thing he said.

The sand cloud made following Kensuke impossible, but still Misato tried, blindly searching for any trace of where he’d gone. She found nothing.

She’d completely lost track of where she was herself. Squinting her eyes, she switched her wristwatch to compass mode and began walking in the direction she’d last seen Super Eva, when the giant had been run through by the Lance of Longinus.

She felt no trace of the Ark’s repelling power. Had the enemy truly left?

Stuck at the bottom of the canyon, and being only the size of a person, there was no way for Misato to know for sure.

As the wind began to clear away the cloud, Misato found Ayanami in a heap on the ground.

“Trois!”

The dried sand had coated the girl, turning her bright white. Misato ran over to her and brushed the sediment from her face.

“Trois! Wake up!”

That was when she noticed that this Ayanami wasn’t Trois.

The girl was wearing an older plugsuit; brushing the sand away revealed its black color.

“Are you…Quatre?”

The girl who’d taken Misato so far from home was breathing, but not conscious.

What happened?

Immediately on guard, Misato looked all around. But she saw no sign of Quatre’s mutant Eva-0.0 anywhere near.

“What does this mean?” she said aloud.

The sound of approaching jet engines added to the wind that blew through the red canyon.

The noise sounded like reality returning, announcing that it was humanity’s turn to take their positions on this stage.

“Those are military craft,” Misato said. “Locals.”

If questioned, Misato could argue she was hauled here by force, but Shinji had made his own way here, intruding in someone else’s backyard, where he proceeded to go on a rampage. Talking her way out of this situation wasn’t going to be easy.

“But what else is new?”

The ear-splitting sound belonged to two Moroccan fighter jets bearing large camera pods for reconnaissance.

The roar of the machines bounced back and forth across the steep walls of the gorge as the jets circled several times. Eventually, they released the pods, which turned out to be drones. The drones had just unfolded their wings and begun to scout when—

VWOOSH!

The fighter jets suddenly peeled away and flew toward the northeast.

Misato realized she’d been cowering. She stood back up and said, “Hm? That direction is…”

Somehow—whether through teleportation or other means—Eva Euro-II had come to the valley as well.

“Looks like her retinue has caught up with her.”

Misato glanced at Quatre on the ground beside her. The girl’s

eyes were clouded and distant; she might have been conscious, she might not have been.

The commander crouched down, put Quatre's limp arm around her shoulder, and stood back up.

"Come on," she grumbled, realizing how heavy a body could be when it offered no assistance. "Stand on your own."

First things first. I need to find Super Eva. So…why do I seem to recall some body-snatched idiot saying something about giants being giant so that everyone could see them?

Misato looked to the sky. The propeller-powered drones were focusing their search on the same area toward which the commander had been headed. She resumed her walk.

Quatre's feet got tangled together, and Misato stumbled forward and groaned.

"What did you get out of bringing me here from Hakone, huh? Well, enjoy your stupor while you can. Just know that your present satisfaction is only the prelude to your next discontent."

From the distance came the noise of a swarm of helicopters, or maybe tiltrotor aircraft, and they were advancing fast.

The valley probably hadn't been that hard to find. The giant clouds of sand and smoke were a dead giveaway.

Flying under the banner of the UN, the fleet of mixed European military aircraft raced toward the Atlas Mountains from Cyprus.

One plane, a heavy VTOL aircraft, had been outfitted like an aerial control center. Its role was, in fact, to control Eva Euro-II's dummy plug, either through direct communications or, now that the shrinking of the Earth had rendered satellites useless, through intermediary aircraft in the stratosphere.

The staff of Nerv Germany had been taken by surprise when Euro-II traveled beyond normal space in pursuit of Quatre's Eva-0.0. When Euro-II's signal suddenly jumped to north Africa, the fleet gave chase as fast as they could.

But their problems weren't over. Indeed, the worst was yet to come.

Inside the aerial control center, a Nerv Germany technician said, “Heurtebise isn’t responding to the command signal.”

Euro-II was the code name for the Eva; Heurtebise was its official designation.

Nerv Germany had begun the construction of the Eva from the leftover components of the Eva-02 build, but the project had mostly stalled until the Lance of Longinus wiped out 1.9 million souls in a single apocalyptic event, and all the nations of Europe stepped forward to help with the effort.

In recognition of the international collaboration, the Eva was christened with the French name of an Angel—not of the same Judeo-Christian tradition that the Angels took their names from, but one imagined by the avant-garde artist, Jean Cocteau.

But now, this white angel, designed to serve as the hand of humanity, was not responding to commands.

The signals weren’t being jammed. Even if that had been the case, they had ways of dealing with that, many of which could be performed autonomously from the Eva’s side. But with the telemetry data showing all systems normal, the technicians were left exchanging perplexed looks.

The battle in the Atlas Mountains had centered on Super Eva and Armaros. Left behind on the mesa was the giant humanoid figure that had materialized mid-grapple with Armaros. But the figure wasn’t so humanoid now; its form had been thoroughly jumbled with manifestations of other animals. Now the rabid movements of the former Eva-02 Allegorica were coming to a stop.

Gone was the vigor the giant had exhibited when it challenged Armaros; now it seemed to be forgetting why it was even here. If the self and the external were to completely mix, and the giant’s individuality, physical form, and thoughts were forgotten, disorder would be all that remained. Eva-02 would likely never move again. For now, the Eva was kneeling, head down.

This was the position it was in when the pure white Eva Euro-II—Eva-02’s sister—arrived. The graviton floaters in Euro-II’s Allegorica wings hummed as it landed beside its muddled twin.

The person who used to be Asuka no longer noticed the blue of the sky.

On the moon, she and Eva-02 had touched the Ark, the saved data of all living creatures, and consequently, both had changed. The information of all creation was erasing Asuka and Eva-02 as individuals, and as one mass they hurled their rage at the one-winged Armaros. They threw themselves at the black giant, slamming him into the surface of the moon—at least, that's what should have happened.

Instead, the entwined giants had dived through the moon's surface as if it were water, and then—

Blue.

They'd been tossed from the moon's monotone vista into a world vibrant with color everywhere—but none as striking as the blue.

How… How am I here?

Had Asuka not yet lost her individuality, she might have been able to formulate a guess based on events she'd witnessed on the moon. She'd watched the Angel Carriers disappear into the moon's surface on their way to a battle somewhere else, and she'd discovered Armaros pulling material belonging the Earth's core from the moon.

But now her very existence was being mixed together with and overwritten by a vast jumble of consciousnesses, and the former Asuka wasn't aware that she'd returned to Earth, nor did she notice the blue sky for which she'd so badly yearned.

A pathetic moan was the only sound she made. Her last spoken words had been forgotten.

Her body continued to deform to the point where it didn't look like any particular creature at all. Unable to settle, all that was left was deterioration. Her movements slowed, and Armaros pushed her aside and left to deal with Super Eva.

All her emotions had been encapsulated into rage, but even

that, too, began to crumble away among the multitude. That which had once been Eva-02 and that which had once been Asuka—and the stored information of the creatures that had flowed into her—were mixing together and losing their values, their form, and the definition of their existence.

Not knowing who or what she was, and unable to remember the long journey that had brought her here, the glob of a giant knelt and lowered her head, and became still.

Chapter 60:
Unit Two's Voice

HIKARI THOUGHT she heard a call for help.

She awoke.

"Where…am I?"

Her head pounded, and her body ached like she'd been through torture. She had been.

The Euro Eva's dummy plug was controlled remotely, with Hikari taking the role of a key in the ignition. Electrodes had been plugged into her body and from them the control signals were released. She piloted Euro-II in the physical sense only, and she did so crying and screaming in pain. This same method of control had caused irrevocable injury to the bodies and minds of all child pilots selected by the European command, though the records had been expunged.

But Hikari wasn't aware—at least not consciously—of her physical pain. Her mind had been somewhere else. With someone else. The first time she boarded Euro-II, she happened to think, *This is like what Asuka is always doing.*

And when she pictured her classmate, the other presence within the Eva appeared to her, seemingly summoned by Hikari's mental image. Their two consciousnesses began to talk.

They didn't talk with words, of course, and Hikari never knew exactly what it was they said. But she pictured the presence as a comforting warmth that watched over her and separated her mind from her physical pain and, sometimes, soothingly called out to her. Freed from her body and her memories, she giggled back at the presence like a little girl. Through these shared moments of warmth, her mind was able to survive the terrible pain without breaking.

A soul could not be split up; that seemed to be a rule of the world. Euro-II's body had been salvaged from cast-off parts during the creation of Nerv Japan's Eva-02. Maybe this presence wasn't a

soul but rather an impression left behind. But even though Hikari's awareness was only hazy, she was sure of one thing.

"You're Asuka's mother."

Then, in northern Africa, the dummy plug controls completely shut down.

Behind Hikari's plug seat—and behind the plug seat in every Eva—there was a large and clearly antiquated disc-based storage device—the logical definition drive.

When an Eva was in an awakened state, there was always a danger that the soul within its core could go berserk, and unless a pilot had achieved a dangerously high synchronization, an Eva left on its own couldn't maintain its humanoid form. The LDD constantly streamed data into the Eva—data that told the giant what it was, what form it took, and other aspects of its existence. The system formed the fundamental basis of Eva control.

All Evangelions had the ability to change their form. These chances could include the development of new abilities, regeneration, degradation, and retrogression.

But the massively large storage device held information those changes could never degrade or overwrite. And right now, that disc had stopped spinning, bypassing the dummy plug system and putting Hikari in direct control of the Eva. But she had no understanding of anything that was happening around her. Her memories ended at the start of her synchronization tests with Euro-II.

She felt as if this was the first time in a long time that she'd been conscious and aware in her own body. She knew nothing of her current situation or surroundings, but in the middle of the entry plug's display was a strange, kneeling, formless shape.

"Asuka?"

Hikari didn't perceive that she and her family had been held in Germany against their will.

As far as she was concerned, the Lance of Longinus had gone into orbit during her working holiday, the widespread disasters had

cut off transportation back to her home country, and communications had become spotty. That was when she agreed to travel to Germany instead, to try out as a test pilot for their Evangelion program.

The majority of the fourteen-year-old children brought together in Tokyo-3 three years ago had been candidate Eva pilots (though their aptitudes varied greatly). Hikari had been one of them. She was told that Nerv Japan had given the go-ahead and that their contracts were in order; she felt she had no grounds to refuse.

She was sad that the assignment would keep her away from Toji for the foreseeable future, but she wasn't unhappy. She wanted to see the country where her friend Asuka had been raised.

And now she was here—wherever "here" was—and confused by the sudden, stark gap that stretched between her memories and the situation in which she found herself.

What's happened?

I remember…seeing a black-winged Eva-0.0 flying around me.

But I've only done a few test launches.

I remember…battling with Ikari-kun. His Eva looked different from before.

"But…why?"

A fog shrouded her memories.

And before that… Before that…

My sister.

Hikari wailed in grief, and her cry became her Eva's roar, which echoed through the gorge and shattered the brief silence that had fallen there. Her emotions poured out like water bursting through a dam.

< < My sister… > >

How could I have forgotten?

< < My sister is dead! A light came over her! She turned into salt! > >

Heurtebise dropped to its knees, the force cracking the rocky mesa. The angelic white Eva put its arms around the twisted mass that had once been Asuka.

< < I couldn't do anything, Asuka! > >

Hikari, and the presence with her, needed Asuka's help.

< < I don't want this anymore! Asuka, don't you leave me, too! > >

Here, in the Valley of Human Bodies, deep within North Africa's Atlas Mountains, where Seele, as the Kaji-vessel, said the Human Instrumentality Project of a past world had met its failure, where the lamentations of the Eva had manifested as the countless colossi that filled the canyon's basin, where Asuka had appeared with Armaros, though now she was but a muddled earthen lump, a forgotten friend called her by a forgotten name.

And, just faintly, she responded.

< < Asuka! > >

Chapter 61:
Hikari's Contemplation

THE ROAR OF jet exhaust proceeded a squadron of fighter jets flying in from the northeast and over Heurtebise's head.

Then came a long, uninterrupted swarm of low-frequency rumbles, and a large fleet of mixed aircraft came into view.

They'd come from Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean in pursuit of Ayanami Quatre's Eva-0.0. The fleet contained many different types of military aircraft from every country in Europe; among them was Heurtebise's control plane.

Quatre had teleported here, and Heurtebise had also overcome the boundaries of physical space to travel the distance in nearly no time at all. When the Eva's signal had reappeared in northwest Africa, the fleet had given chase and was only now arriving.

But something wasn't right.

That the VTOL and STOL aircraft came in for a landing was no surprise, but even the large fixed wing aircraft began to decelerate. The mesa was fairly flat, but too rocky to be suitable as a landing strip, so the fleet flattened the ground with a succession of explosives before attempting to land. Some succeeded, but others flipped over and crashed or fell down into the gorges.

But what had caused this mad rush?

After quickly distancing himself from the scene, Kensuke leaked the presence of the Ark in the Atlas Mountains, complete with photographic evidence. He left out the part where the Ark had been taken away.

By throwing the fleet into chaos, he'd hoped to make an escape.

The rest of the world still believed the Ark offered salvation. They didn't yet know that it was a data backup system—like a save file in a video game—for hastening the reconstruction of the next world after this one failed the Human Instrumentality Project.

As if oblivious to the mayhem unfolding around her, Hikari kept calling Asuka's name to the slumped-over earthen giant.

And each time she said it, << Asuka, Asuka, >> the words pierced into the clump that used to bear that name, and the clump made a tiny movement.

Or at least, that's what it looked like to Hikari.

The sun had set, and the giant moon, having been revealed in its true form half a day earlier, cast its brilliant glow upon the land. The military forces littered the gorge with their encampments; their electric lights were countless tiny stars stubbornly refusing to be outshone by the swollen moon's enlarged, reflective surface.

Hikari had continued to ignore the signals from Heurtebise's command plane. She was still calling out her friend's name. Outside the Eva, she had never been the kind of person who could ignore other people when they talked to her, but now, some part of her still-fuzzy consciousness compelled her to do only that which she deemed important.

Her Evangelion, Heurtebise, had been set up for remote operation. In order for the pilot to accept the dummy plug without resistance, her brain's activity had been limited to a half-awake state—or, to put it another way, she lived in a faint but constant dream-like state. This was convenient for remote control, but when the dummy plug's autonomous programs were in total dysfunction, as they were now, they had no way of reaching the girl dreaming inside the giant—a giant that, unfortunately for them, never needed to stop to refuel.

But even in her trance—or possibly *because* of it—she came upon a realization.

Her thoughts weren't simply contained within her brain; they extended into the Eva's consciousness. She was aware of the presence of Asuka's mother, even though the woman wasn't thought to have been bound to this Eva at the time of its construction. But even more importantly, if she had been in full possession of her faculties, she might not have recognized her friend in the muddled mass that was before her now.

Yet this wasn't enough. Something was missing. But what?

< < Asuka, what do I need to do? > >

< < Asuka, do you accept no longer existing? > > Hikari asked. < < Is there no one you want to see again? Not Ayanami-san, or Misato-san, or…Ikari-kun? > >

Hikari suddenly remembered. “Ikari-kun. Ikari-kun is here. I saw his Eva flying…I think.” She groaned in frustration. “Why is it so hard for me to think?”

That indistinct memory came from the Eva’s consciousness.

Amid the maze of ribbon cables and assorted devices that had been designed to control her mind (though they were no longer operational), Hikari shook her head, opened and closed her hands a few times to make sure she still could, and then put them back on the grips of her control sticks.

“Even my own body feels huge,” she remarked, only noticing now.

The N_2 reactor increased its output, and Heurtebise unfolded its wings. Seeing the Allegorica unit’s diamond slits begin to align the gravitons, the Nerv Germany staff, who at some point had gathered around the Eva for the purpose of rebooting it from the outside, scrambled away just before the white giant floated weightlessly into the night sky and surveyed the ground below.

In the moonlight, all she could see clearly were the areas in shadow, as if she were looking upon the moon’s surface, but as her vision adjusted, she saw a collection of creepy-looking rock formations that resembled an assembly of Evangelions, while countless people bustled about between them.

Where…is this?

She’d asked the question before, but now she tried to figure out the answer.

The AI delivered the information straight into her brain.

Morocco, North Africa. The Dadès Gorges. Near the outskirts of Boumalne Dadès.

But the map’s topographical data no longer matched reality.

Mountains had been leveled, and a newly formed, roughly two-kilometer-wide crater had cleaved an eerily round basin amid the far more complex geography.

All 28,000 kilometers of the orbiting Lance of Longinus had pierced through the planet at 90 kilometers per second.

On exit, the lance had blasted apart a patch of the ocean nearly two thousand kilometers wide, destroying entire islands and sending a two-hundred-meter-tall tsunami crashing into Australia's eastern coastline. Compared to that, this crater was tiny.

Hikari found the giant she'd been searching for. The large figure was on its knees in the center of the crater.

Super Eva had been pierced through along with the Earth, and its heart had been stolen. The Eva was motionless. The soldiers had pinned the giant to the ground with crisscrossing wires that glistened in the moving searchlights, and a swarm of military engineers were creating a shower of sparks as they tried to torch their way through the entry plug lock.

Contrary to Kensuke's aims, Misato hadn't left the area. Amid the confusion, she stole a European military uniform and, holding Ayanami Quatre in her arms, had taken cover behind some rocks near Super Eva.

She'd come this far. She was *this* close to Shinji; she needed to rescue him. And she still didn't know what had happened to Ayanami Trois.

But she couldn't do anything with all these soldiers swarming about. They'd become a horde too large to command, and they all had flashlights in hand as they searched for the Ark.

The scene was surreal. Search teams belonging to every country had abandoned their efforts elsewhere and were streaming in from as far away as Mount Ararat. Aircraft continued to fly in, and those that failed the landing and crashed were left to burn.

Yet even more planes came in, drawn like moths to the flames of their fallen brethren. By now, fully half had crashed, which in turn drew in even more insects.

With flames behind them, the horde swarmed everywhere in their single-minded search.

Their individual murmurs of expectation and impatience blended into a low, all-encompassing hum. No one showed any interest in Misato or Quatre.

Before too long, the local military arrived with soldiers from other African nations. They were less than thrilled at having their sovereignty trampled upon by the European forces. The two sides stared each other down from a close distance, but in the end, everyone broke rank to search for the Ark. For the time being, direct conflict didn't arise.

Misato noted that the battle at the end of the previous world, too, had involved a great gathering in this very same place. Those Evangelions had left their sorrows behind in the stone colossi. The only reason the obsessed Ark hunters hadn't started killing each other was because Armaros had taken the object of their desire away, and they hadn't been able to find it.

Once night lifted, they would likely realize the Ark was gone, and they'd slowly return to rational thought. But right now, the soldiers' actions conveyed with painful clarity just how badly humanity wanted to survive.

Just then, Ayanami Quatre—still barely conscious in Misato's arms—turned her hollow gaze upward.

THUD!

A dust cloud rose.

Though the moon and the ground were bright, the sky was dark, and nobody had noticed Euro-II Heurtebise swooping in until its white legs slammed into the ground.

The Allegorica Wings produced a discordant hum. Heurtebise roared, and all the people on the ground near Super Eva were sent scattering.

Heurtebise put its hands on Super Eva, shaking the giant roughly. The Lilliputian soldiers who had climbed onto the giant went tumbling down. One by one, the wire bonds snapped, tracing arcs in the night sky before landing on the crowd in sprays of blood.

Misato shuddered. No one seemed to care about the tragedy

that had just unfolded; not the people around, and not the people caught in it.

< < Ikari-kun, wake up! > >

The voice in Japanese came through Euro-II's external speakers and across every frequency. Shinji had said that Hikari was piloting the European Eva, and now Misato knew he'd been right.

< < Ikari-kun! > >

Super Eva didn't move. The giant's eyes and visor were closed. A hole had been carved from its chest down to its lower back.

Even Misato could see it was a fatal wound. She reeled.

"But…" she told herself. "But he's still holding his shape. There hasn't been any two-dimensional explosion!"

Together, Shinji and Super Eva made one complete person; they existed in a state of quantum instability. Their heart, and the singularity within it, acted as an anchor keeping them in this universe. How were they still here, retaining their form, when that heart had been stolen?

In fact, Shinji wasn't dead—but unfortunately, it was only a matter of time until he was. And that time, Shinji knew, was running out.

The stolen heart wasn't a living organ but rather a window to higher-dimensional space though which energy waves surged. Though separated from his body, the heart still powered Shinji and Super Eva through quantum jumps.

But over the span of several hours, Shinji's strength had rapidly faded. He didn't know why, but he guessed that the heart was being taken farther and farther away.

After he'd been melted by Unit Quatre's gamma-ray laser, Shinji had been reconstructed sharing a single heart with Unit One. He lacked a heart of his own, that biological constant among all other people.

Shinji placed his hand over his chest and felt no heartbeat within. There, his hand froze; he no longer possessed the strength to move. He could sense that his body had grown cold.

His face had lost any expression. All he could do now was take what shallow breaths remained and await death. It wouldn't be long now.

Hikari spoke through Heurtebise's speakers.

< < Ikari-kun, that's you, isn't it? I'm going to do something a bit extreme, so…sorry! You can be mad at me later. > >

Hikari's psyche had extended to her Eva's thoughts, and she realized she possessed within herself something that could save Shinji. By the time she knew it, Heurtebise's right hand was already clutching its left shoulder pylon. The metal groaned. She gasped with pain and then screamed.

From his world of total darkness inside the plug, Shinji heard the scream of someone he knew, and he asked, though he didn't know if the words actually came out, "Assistant class rep? Horaki-san, is that you? What… What are you—"

Heurtebise had ripped off her left Q.R. Signum, shoulder pylon and all. She held the severed body part aloft, red blood gushing out, and jammed it into Super Eva's chest hole.

< < Class rep—Ikari-kun! > > she said. < < Call out to Asuka! > >

The Q.R. Signum was a quantum transmission port for energy. It was also a scale belonging to the black giant that had defeated him. The moment the Signum was thrust into Super Eva's chest, the scale extended needles in all directions into the Eva's body and made itself one with the Eva.

Hikari yelped in surprise.

A darkness overcame Shinji, even blacker than the darkness of near-death, and a mighty power coursed through his body.

But in exchange, a black *thing* wormed its way through each and every one of his veins. The pain and revulsion pushed into every part of his body. He thought he might puke.

Shinji screamed.

His body was cold and heavy, but strength filled him. It was a strange and unsettling feeling.

Super Eva's body, inside and out, became stained with the Q.R. Signum's color.

Misato shuddered. "What did she do? Now he's going to—"

Just then, Super Eva's head visor opened, followed by his eyes.

The world came back into view inside Shinji's entry plug. The first thing he saw was the Q.R. Signum in his chest.

"This can't be real!" he said. "Tell me it's not. Right?"

In front of him was Eva Euro-II. Blood ran from the giant's shoulder as Heurtebise turned around without warning, stirring up a strong wind and then fired its positron rifle.

< < Don't touch her! > > Hikari shouted.

The positron shell grazed the top of the mesa, where several cranes were attempting to raise the mass that had once been Eva-02.

The shot was only a warning, and Hikari had missed on purpose. But even so, several soldiers were ionized by the blast, and a number of cranes lost their balance and dropped the muddled giant down into the gorge among the stone colossi.

< < Asuka! > >

"Horaki-san," Shinji said, "who are you calling Asuka?"

He didn't understand anything Hikari was saying. But he could figure out what was going on later. For now, all his thoughts were on Asuka.

The murky giant fell into the galaxy of flashlights, and the stars moved, rippling out like a wave.

Some stars jumped, some stars went out.

And then the frenzy began. The muddy, jumbled-up lump of a giant rose unsteadily, and the stone formations around it suddenly changed shape.

"What is that?" Misato asked. "Is that…a protozoan?"

It looked like one to her. But the protozoan was as tall as the

rock tower had been—as tall as an Evangelion. The single-celled animal fell over and was crushed by its own weight. Its fluids scattered and began ingesting the crowd of soldiers.

That was just the first one.

One after another, the rock formations transformed into myriad once-tiny creatures—some long extinct. Previously only viewable through magnifying glasses or microscopes, the creatures now required a craned neck to be seen fully.

Some changed form more than once. People were scooped up and crushed by cilia longer than a whale's whiskers; they were swallowed by membranes filled with digestive fluid. The canyon provided very few escape routes. Soldiers fled this way and that, the crowds pressed into each other, and in no time, the situation had devolved into total panic.

Some had begun to fire their weapons at the giants, but the creatures' bodies had too much volume to be affected. What could the soldiers have possibly done against an enemy of that magnitude?

In the gaps between the colossi, Shinji saw the mud giant moving forward—and he caught a glimpse of a person in red running across the breaks between the stone statues.

"Asuka," he whispered.

Having been through the brutal rebooting process of the Q.R. Signum, Super Eva ran toward the parade of giant creatures.

Under the bright light of the swollen moon, Hikari watched Super Eva wade into the madness.

"Ikari-kun, call Asuka back. I…I couldn't. I tried, but I couldn't."

Super Eva leaped into the forest of colossi from the previous world.

Pursuing the formless, mud-like giant, Shinji wondered if the woman he'd seen had just been a trick of his mind.

But still—and with hesitation in his voice—he did something

he'd never thought he'd do again: He called out to her.

< < Asuka. > >

At the sound of Shinji's voice, the mud giant jumped and began running away.

< < What? Hey, wait! > >

As Super Eva weaved through the forest of stone giants, they began to transform into another swarm of colossal creatures.

Super Eva was pushing his way past a tower of rocks when the stone transformed into a preposterously gargantuan trilobite. The creature immediately grabbed the Eva with its perfectly ordered array of legs and attempted to sate a hunger that had been bottled away for hundreds of millions of years.

"Get off!" Shinji yelled as he kicked the trilobite in the stomach and sent the huge creature flying. By the time it landed, the trilobite had transformed into an entirely different species of arthropod.

Meanwhile, the soldiers below had nowhere to run.

Within the inescapable canyon, slime molds released their spores, and the heartbeats of gigantic see-through creatures sounded like explosions thundering between the cliff faces. Otherworldly monsters fell from above, and rock formations toppled.

As the mud giant and Super Eva ran, their footsteps seemed to materialize from the dark sky without warning, flinging aside everything and everyone unfortunate enough to be caught in their path. There was no telling where the next footstep would fall.

Overhead, a jellyfish had wrapped itself around Super Eva, who shredded the creature from the inside and rained hundreds of tons of gelatinous tissue onto the canyon's floor.

All Shinji saw was the back of the giant running ahead of him.

Super Eva charged into the wriggling swarm of ancient creatures of unusual size.

The entire gorge was becoming an exhibition of larger-than-life models made by the hand of God. The data of innumerable

creatures swirled like a maelstrom inside Asuka and Eva-02, turning them all into a gray jumble. In the statues left behind after the final battle of the last world, the data found new vessels and poured into them, taking new forms at will.

Shinji pushed his way through the giant creatures toward the figure at the center of the moving chaos.

"I need more speed," Shinji said.

Each time the data of another creature was released, the evasive figure grew faster, its movements more fluid.

I'm…out of breath.

Shinji felt as though dry ice had been stitched into his chest. He felt simultaneously hot and cold, and both sensations burned.

He was running, but everything outside of his sight—everything behind him—was darkness. The effect gave the illusion that the darkness was chasing after him.

But to Shinji, the illusion felt very real. In his mind, the darkness really *was* coming to swallow him up. Between the vast power flowing into him and this persistent, consuming feeling that came as its price, Shinji couldn't stand still.

The darkness wasn't evil or hostile, nor did it have thought or will.

If he had to liken what he sensed to anything, it was like the seasons—or nature, or the universe. The darkness was coming, and it would kill him without hesitation the moment he let his guard down. It was the terrifying beauty and cruelty of divine law. It moved like the gears of a gigantic clock, caring nothing for Shinji's circumstances. It was a system that carved away the world with emotionless precision.

"Oh," Shinji said, feeling like he understood what the darkness was.

He was feeling his own powerlessness. He finally knew the terror that had awakened within Ayanami Rei Quatre when the Q.R. Signum was shot into her, activating her self-awareness.

I might end up the same way…

Except he had a purpose that kept him moving.

“Asuka!” he shouted.

That was all he had.

Another stone statue transformed, and the stalk of a gymnospermous plant rose higher and higher.

Each time the giant that had once been Asuka and Eva-02 transferred the data of another past creature into a nearby rock formation, the Eva regained more of its original appearance and became more beautiful.

The red figure crossed Shinji’s vision again.

Before him, the running giant came in and out of view as it weaved through the colossi. The figure’s outline appeared more crisp, with more detail, sometimes taking on a deeper red before fading back to gray, and then red again.

An ancient fern grew swift and tall—too tall—and with a cracking sound the plant toppled and covered the lights of the fleeing people below.

The running giant leaped over the fallen leaves. It was looking more and more familiar now.

Familiar? Shinji thought. *But I haven’t seen anything like this before.*

Something trailed behind the giant. Wings? Hair?

Was this a person or an Eva? Whatever it was, the figure reminded Shinji of Asuka in her plugsuit, and the resemblance was growing stronger. The giant had a slender waist and hips that moved rhythmically back and forth. Her legs made a delicate silhouette, but each time her feet hit the ground she leaped powerfully, like a coiled spring.

< < Asuka, wait! > > Shinji said.

Whether at school or in the HQ, she’d always been near him. On occasion, he’d accidentally seen her in various states of undress (though she never seemed to get as mad as he would have expected). But the last time he’d seen her with his own eyes, she was wearing her plugsuit—with Ayanami Rei Cinq—preparing to embark on a reconnaissance mission to the moon.

Is this a hallucination? Shinji wondered. *Have I gone mad?*

Asuka had crossed the Longinus Curtain and disappeared. He'd sworn to rescue her, but before he could, he'd been defeated by Armaros instead.

Am I even worthy of chasing her?

A pile of ancient fish blocked his path. They flopped about, scattering the lights below and eating everything they could find. Super Eva waded through them, but its pace had slowed.

As Shinji began to doubt himself, Hikari's voice arrived like a slap in the face.

< < She's getting farther away! > > Hikari shouted. < < Just chase after her! And be sure to catch her! > >

She's right, Shinji thought. *If I'm being given another chance, I don't care if it comes from God or the devil—I'm not letting it go!*

Shinji climbed over the amphibians that were trying to crawl up his legs. He crossed a hill ahead.

< < Asuka! > >

Shinji passed between two rocks shortly after she did, and the rocks became enormous dinosaurs. One charged at him low and from the side, striking below Super Eva's center of gravity. The Eva went flying and slammed into the side of the cliff.

The other dinosaur came at him with bared fangs. Super Eva smacked the creature away with a swift punch, but its long neck twirled, and it came back for another attack. Its fangs had become a long, sharp beak.

Shinji cried out; the dinosaur had punctured his eye.

My A.T. Field isn't working!

Or rather, he didn't understand how the Q.R. Signum's shield worked.

What do I care? That's not what matters right now!

< < Asuka! > >

He grabbed the dinosaur's neck and snapped it, somehow managing to hurl the beast away. But he'd lost sight of the figure he'd chased into the towering ferns.

Suddenly, the darkness was back. In an instant, half his body had been swallowed by its shadow.

< < Asuka! Where are you? > >

Fleeing from the darkness, he searched for any sign of her. He stumbled against the cliff face more than once.

But he couldn't find her. The green leaves of the unnaturally large plants turned red and began to fall in such numbers that Shinji could no longer see.

Is this it? Is this how it ends?

Pleading like a little boy, he cried, < < I've lost you too many times! Asuka! Don't go! > >

He stumbled right. He stumbled left. He circled around a rock, and—

She was waiting.

The giant looked like Asuka, or like Asuka mixed with her Eva.

She'd nearly finished shedding the creatures that had merged with her body. A thin, grayish film remained on the outside, but that, too, peeled and fell away, revealing her body entirely in red.

Shinji came crying to her like a lost child who'd found his mother, but at the last moment, he tried to cover it with an awkward laugh.

< < Ha ha! Look at you. You told me you were going to have them paint your Eva the color of the moon. But red just suits you better. > >

He fell to his knees.

The red giant reached her hand out to him, and he grasped it.

Nearly all of the canyon's colossi—those vestiges of grief—had been transformed into giant creatures. The gorge would never look the same. As for the creatures, by the time morning came, they had all been crushed to death by their own weight.

Freed from the false eternity of the Ark, their short lives ended in a single night, and their immense bodies lay down to rest on the

Earth alongside all the people they'd trampled.

As the sun rose, and the maddening moon set, the curtain fell on the frenzied festival.

Chapter 62:
Hikari's Homecoming

NERV JAPAN BORROWED two UN transport planes designed to carry Eva-sized cargo. The flight to Morocco took sixteen hours, and an aurora danced overhead the entire time. Even in high altitudes, the air now carried a strong electric potential difference. Despite having avoided any thunderclouds, one mid-sized accompanying plane was struck by lightning out of the clear blue sky and had to turn around due to mechanical trouble.

But the most unsettling sight was the impossibly large depression in the ground, centered near Kyrgyzstan but reaching from the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in China all the way to Kazakhstan. The earth was pushing in all around the depression and formed wrinkle-like chasms that consumed everything that got sucked in.

Since time immemorial, the region had been a frequent site for large earthquakes. There, beneath the tectonic plates, several of the mantle's convection systems met and flowed downward, creating what was thought to be Earth's only super cold plume. The Eurasian continent owed its size to the mantle's flow toward this geological drainage pipe; the tectonic plates followed the flow and settled there like leaves during a storm.

The Earth's mantle was mostly solid and had never flowed with any considerable speed. But with the Earth continuing to lose its inner mass, the slow-moving structure had begun to disappear. Much like honey poured from a jar, once the initial state of cohesion was broken, the flow didn't stop.

As the Acting Deputy Commander of Nerv Japan, Toji couldn't say it, but he thought—

This scale of catastrophe isn't something humanity can do anything about.

On the inside, Toji was deeply troubled. And so was everyone else who saw it.

Their destination in Morocco was just barely within the transport ships' fuel range, but due to the global disasters, the African side was unable to secure the fuel necessary for the return trip. Seeing no other choice, Nerv Japan had sought assistance from Europe as part of their countries' obligation to the United Nations.

The countries balked at first, but, surprisingly, when word got out that Nerv Japan's Acting Deputy Commander Toji Suzuhara was in charge of the operation, the air forces of several countries independently sent out aerial refueling tankers to help.

The survivors of the failed mission to assault Nerv Japan remembered how Toji—the Japanese high-school kid with a funny accent—had crisscrossed the mountains of northern Japan to offer aid and repatriation to the soldiers whose planes had crashed there. Now they were repaying their debt.

At the time, Toji had claimed he ran the rescue operation because he wanted to look good, but once he'd learned that Hikari was Euro-II's pilot, he'd purposefully worked to build common ground with the Europeans.

Inside the temporary CIC in the giant-transport plane, the commander of the Akashima, Lieutenant Colonel Kasuga (superior of the pilot, Warrant Officer Endo) watched Toji looking at the main screen.

"Do good for others," the soldier said, "and you do good for yourself, don't they say?"

His ulterior motive having been correctly sussed out, Toji looked away and curtly replied, "Please, leave me be."

An electronic tone beeped, and the pilot announced in English that the plane was approaching its destination. The chaos at the Atlas Mountains had largely subsided, and the European and African armies had separated and formed battle lines.

Nerv Japan's arrival had been approved both on the UN level and with the involved nations, and African fighter jets had been escorting Nerv Japan's fleet for some time now.

Apparently, a lot had happened on the ground, and a dangerous situation could still break out without warning. But for

now, both the European and African forces were busy evacuating their wounded.

All around Toji, the soldiers and crew went into a flurry of activity, and the paratroopers began their preparations.

"We're counting on you," Toji said to Kasuga.

The Lieutenant Colonel offered a grin. "Well, you have our family hostage, so we'll do the job right—even if we have to ad lib."

"Ah… Your family, huh?" *The dogs.*

In the cargo hold of the lead transport plane was Akashima, separated into three containers. Toji had asked the JSSDF for the Akashima's support because no other heavy machinery was readily available to help on the scene. Without the anti-Angel mechanized giant's help, if the four-thousand-metric-ton Super Eva toppled over on this irregular terrain, they'd be stuck here for too long.

Well, he had one other option. He could have brought down Ayanami Six's Eva-0.0 from orbit, where it remained fully operational, if in a suspended state. But that would have meant taking Six from Hakone.

"Azuchi, Momo," said little Ayanami Rei Six inside a small park within the Nerv Japan HQ's grounds. Two large golden retrievers walked up to her.

Near Six, the three N-Type monitoring robots cowered with fear at the approach of the large dogs. As before, they hid in a single-file line behind the girl—but this time there were two dogs, and hiding from both simultaneously wasn't possible.

When they realized that fact, the cowardly consorts began pushing each other toward the dogs, each seeking to use its companions as a shield.

Ignoring her robots' unsightly fracas, Six threw her arms around the dogs' necks.

As the pilot of Nerv Japan's only remaining Evangelion, Unit-00 Type-F, Six was the vanguard of the HQ's garrison, which had been left under Fuyutsuki's temporary command, and her job

was to stay here at the ready.

"Shake!" she said. "No, my hand, not my head."

Due to the circumstances, Toji had requested the JSSDF send Akashima overseas to cooperate in the recovery, and the request went through easier than he'd expected.

When most of the water drained from Lake Ashi, something had appeared from its former depths, and the Japanese government had asked to form a joint investigation with Nerv Japan.

Well, every relationship requires give and take.

A buzzer went off, signaling it was time for the first team to jump.

When Toji landed, he removed his mask and observed his surroundings from the cockpit.

He switched the Akashima from ground-effect cruising mode to bipedal mode, and the mechanized giant's wings folded away. Beside the mecha, several N_2 Flankers landed—canopies open, turbines switched off.

The Akashima had been a testing unit for the graviton floaters in Eva-02 Allegorica's wings, and now Toji was using the robot to walk on this distant land.

But still, he remarked, "Man, this thing doesn't have a toilet, a bed, or a refrigerator!"

Then he said, "Yo!"

He greeted the approaching giant. It was white, aside from a deep crimson patch on its left shoulder.

<< Long time no see, >> replied Hikari's voice from the Heurtebise.

"How's it going?"

<< I've been better. >>

OMAKE

NEON GENESIS

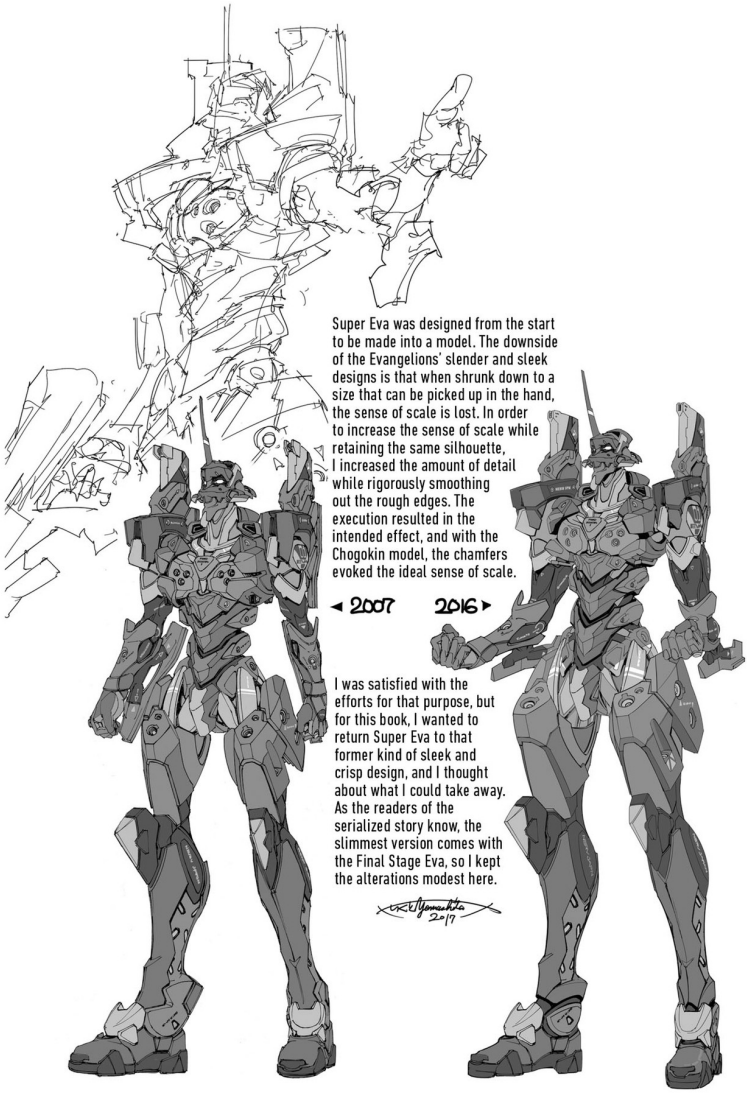
CONCEPT GALLERY

EVANGELION: ANIMA

EVANGELION UNIT-03
A TRIAL MASS-PRODUCTION MODEL DEVELOPED BY SEELE'S SECRETIVE DIVISION.
SEELE RECONNAISSANCE DRONE
THE DESIGN IS BASED ON THE AMERICAN B-2 STEALTH BOMBER, EQUIPPED WITH AN ORGANIC AI.
ILLUSTRATION: MAGAKI RYOTA

ROUGH COVER SKETCH

This sketch made it to the coloring step, but it just wasn't coming together, so it got scrapped.



Super Eva was designed from the start to be made into a model. The downside of the Evangelions' slender and sleek designs is that when shrunk down to a size that can be picked up in the hand, the sense of scale is lost. In order to increase the sense of scale while retaining the same silhouette, I increased the amount of detail while rigorously smoothing out the rough edges. The execution resulted in the intended effect, and with the Chogokin model, the chamfers evoked the ideal sense of scale.

◀ 2007 2016 ▶

I was satisfied with the efforts for that purpose, but for this book, I wanted to return Super Eva to that former kind of sleek and crisp design, and I thought about what I could take away. As the readers of the serialized story know, the slimmest version comes with the Final Stage Eva, so I kept the alterations modest here.

Yamamoto 2017

Postscript

THIS BOOK COLLECTS the story serialized in *Dengeki Hobby Magazine* from September 2009 to October 2010.

Well, when you take the Evangelions out of the Hakone area, the story suddenly feels less like *Evangelion* , doesn't it? And *overseas* ? Seems completely contrived! I just wanted to write that before someone else had a chance to.

The Valley of Human Bodies, as the locals call it, does, in fact, exist in the Dadès Gorges of Morocco. The formations don't actually look like people, but in that red canyon are many strangely shaped rocks that resemble internal organs. I saw it on a travel-themed quiz show a long time ago, and I was completely charmed by the cooking vessels used by the locals. The lids looked like conical hats. They're called tagines, and for a while, they became a cooking fad in Japan, but that's neither here nor there.

—IKUTO YAMASHITA,
EVANGELION MECHA DESIGNER

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